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Asian Cult Cinema

Editorial from Thomas Weisser

A few months ago, I presented the brand new, refurbished ACC. At that time I promised the magazine would be heading in a new direction. Now, here comes Issue #15. In many ways I think this one is even better than the predecessor.

The most exciting thing about the improved ACC, both this issue and the previous one, is its high caliber of contributors. Many of the writers from #14 have returned for this time around. Max Allan Collins continues his Foreign Crimes column with a provocative excursus about "rape as a plot point" in the new XX: Beautiful Prev Graham Lewis is back with an excellent piece on the Asian cyberpunk horror films and August Ragone unveils a comprehensive career profile of Sonny Chiba. This issue also features views and reviews by regulars Patrick Macias, Steve Puchalski, Pete Tombs. Wagner James Au. Tony Williams, and Erik J Hughes. Plus some new writers have joined the ACC family: Richard Kadrey, author of Counter Culture Handbook, is on hand with a brilliant critique of Tokyo Fist: renowned critic Julian Stringer takes a second look at Ann Hui's forgotten Spooky Family, and, after an absence of many months. Travis Crawford returns to ACC with issue #15. This is a strong lineup (even without Ric Mevers, but he promises to be back next time around). Here's another expanded 50 page issue, with a new Letters Column, and a revealing pictorial of Evil Dead Trap star Miyuki Ono. So, get comfortable, and enjoy another terrific issue of Asian Cult Cinema.

In case you haven't already heard, Asian Trash Cinema: Books #1 and #2 are being taken out of print. Recently, I made a deal with Berkley/Boulevard Books for those two volumes to be combined and released massmarket under the new Asian Cutt Cinema title. The revised 400 page book will sell for \$13.95 and should be available in stores all over America this Spring. Meanwhile, Yuko and I are continuing our research work on Japanese Cinema: Horror Films and Japanese Cinema: Sex Movies, the first two volumes from our forthcoming Motion Picture Encyclopedia Collection. It's going to be another busy year.

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In This Issue -

EDITORIAL by Thomas Weisser	3
LETTERS with comments by the editor	5



ARTICLES

EIJUN SUZUKI's BRANDED TO KILL	
Reviews and Commentaries	

Reviews and Commentaries				
A) Branded To Kill review	by Patrick Macias			
B) Overview by Tom Weiss	er & Yuko Mihara Weisser			

B)	Overview	by T	om \	Neisser	٠&	Yuko	Miha
C)	Inflatable	Sex	Doll	of the	Wa	astela	nds

	a comparison by Patrick Macias	10
į	A FISTFUL OF REVIEWS by Wagner James Au	12
	CYBERPUNK by Graham Lewis	14
	FLESH & BEYOND by Richard Kadrey	17
Į	VIETNAM VIA HONG KONG	
ı	Review and Commentaries	

neview and commentantes
A) TSUI HARK vs JOHN WOO by Erik J Hughes
B) BETTER TOMORROW & BULLET IN THE HEAD

reviews by Tony Williams and Jean Jacques Malo	21
MANY FACES OF MIYUKI ONO (pictorial)	23
SECOND LOOK: SPOOKY BUNCH by Julian Stringer	27
SHINICHI "SONNY" CHIBA: CAREER PROFILE	
his Assessed December	

SHINICH SUNNY CHIDA: CAREER PRO	FILE
by August Ragone	30
WHO WILL EVER KNOW?	35
INTRODUCING SAMURAI CINEMA	
by Travis Crawford	36

FOREIGN CRIMES column by Max Allan Collins



Front cover features an original design by August Ragone; on the back cover: Miyuki Ono from her photo book by Arao Yokog



Note: Many of the films featured in ACC are supplied by Video Search of Miami. PO Box 16-1917, Miami FL 33116; contact them for a free catalog at (888) 279-9773 (toll free)

20

44

39

40

42

43

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with commentary by editor Tom Weisser

LETTERS

Dear Mr Weisser:

Your instincts about earlier issues of ATC/ACC were dead on the money. Though I've a burgeoning interest in things Asian, I only bought the occasional issue of ACC on the stands because the coverage seemed rather insubstantial in most cases. But your new gallery of writers reeks of professionalism (that's a good thing here), and I've put ACC on my subscription-list at my comics-shop. I'd probably only high high marks to list about.

everything in issue #14, but standouts for me include Graham Lewis' take on the bysycho junkle' (some nice American vs Japanese comparisons here), Pete Tombs on Filipino films (in fact. I wonder if Tombs would care to write something on whether or not Asian horror films have any interesting parallels to what he calls "fantastique" in his book Immoral Tales), Stefan Hammord's collection of gody oneliners, and Ric Meyers' article on pink films.

About the only minor objection I have is to Max Collins' observation that in Tarantino film-dialogue which no matter who's talking in his movies always reminds me of a knowl-flat movies always reminds me of a knowl-flat nowled to the collect. Come on, Max: It's a valid criticism to say that all his characters sound like film-geeks, but like video clerks? Said clerks of which I am not one) are hardly the only people who like to wax knowingly about films: If the comment was meant to be a funny everyone-knows-this reference to Tarantino (which would be my guess) then it was kind of lame humor. Nice trashing of Last Man Standing though.

And finally, on the current debate on Chinese vs Japanese: I want as much as you have on both, plus the occasional bits on Filipino, Hindu, and other "Asian" contributions. ...Gene Phillips

Editors--

You guys are printing the Letter Column again (that really was a stupid move to get rid of it in the first place, get your heads out of the fucking sand, mani) but you seem to be guilty of not reading the very letters you print. The idea behind a Letters Column is to have readers give suggestions about how to improve the magazine. It's obvious that the readers, including yours truly, want more reviews and information on hong Kong films. What the fuck do you do about it? Issue #14 is filled with not only with too much shit about Japanese movies, but now you've gone to include stiff about fucking movies from the Philippinest Why

can't you understand something so simple? Your readers want fucking articles about Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Ti Lung, We want marial arts (Kung Fu foreverl). Why do you keep shoving this Japanese crap down our fucking throats? These Jap movies are nothing but junk food for fucking perverts! —John Crawford.

Vour oninion in

Your opinion is welcomed. I'm alwaysinspired when someone with such an obvious mental handicap manages to put so many words together into complete sentences. Paragraphs must be vary challenging—and rewarding—for you but there's one answer to your juvanile you but they can be compared to your juvanile and product because this is my magazine and that's what I want to do.

Tom:

I can't believe people complain about the ratio of HK and Japanese movies featured in your magazine. Sometimes I wonder how Americans became so narrow-minded. Everyone seems atraid to try anything new. What happened to think for themselves anymore. These people are into Hong Kong films because MTV tells them it's hip. And because Jackie Chan is on David Letternan. It must be very frustrating for you to edit a cutting-edge magazine like ACC. Just try to ignore the idios out there Keep up the great work. Love the new Asian Cut Cinema!

--Shawn Lipton

ACC:

Your Editorial in #14 claimed "You are holding the best issue we've ever published." I guess this is a subjective comment, but just because you recruited a bunch of "celebrities" to write for the magazine, that doesn't automatically make it a "best issue ever." Ric Mevers may be a world renowned authority on Asian films, but his expertise is Martial Arts Movies. NOT Japanese sex movies! How could you be so crass as to force Mr Meyers to waste his Godgiven talent on this type of drivel?

-- James Fulbrook Perhaps you are misguided. At the very least. you're misinformed. Ric requested the assignment on the Japanese Pink Films. While he may be one of the leading experts on Kung Fu movies in the world, he has also databled in S&M entertainment. Don't forget Ric Meyers starred in, wrote and directed such underground whip-n-torture features as Kidnapped Girls Agency (with Linnea Quigley) and Women In Trouble (with Michelle Bauer).

ACC:

I guess I didn't realize how bad the magazine had gotten until I saw the new Issue 14. What an improvement! Asian Cult Cinema is my favorite 'zine again, no matter what Damon Foster says about it. --James Getz

Did Damon Foster really say something bad about ACC?

Tom and everyone at ACC:

Congratulations! The new refurbished magazine is a joy. Issue #14 is everything we could hope for. Intelligent writing, without being snooty. Great pictures. Creative layout. And the return of the Letters Column.

Only one question; how will you be able to keep up this level of excellence?

-- Tom Eliseo

I want to thank all the readers who responded with complimentary letters regarding the new Asian Cult Cinema. Printing them would serve no purpose, as they mirrored the same comments as the two printed above. Yes, it was time for a major change. And most of you agree we're on the right track now.

ACC-

I need your help! I am a "virgin" of all the films reviewed in Asian Cult Cinema. I would love to see all those movies, but, as a starving college student I can't afford to buy them all, Also, in the tiny town I just moved to (moved from Detroit) no video store I've seen carries or orders them to rent. Any suggestions? I'd even buy some of these movies if I only knew where to write.

-- Becky Costello

Dear Asian Cult Cinema

I recently bought two of your books, Asian Trash Cinema #1 and Japanese Cinema The Essential Handbook. I enjoyed both books. especially the one on Japanese Cinema. However, a couple things bewilder me.

How could you not enter the 1968 film Inferno Of First Love in the Jananese Cinema book? I'm afraid that I do not know the director's name off hand, but having seen the film and having known that it had minor oversea's distribution. I think you should have entered this sad, but extremely sensual film in your book.

Also, how could I get ahold of some of the films? Especially Matsumura's All Night Long. The problem is, I live in the UK and many of the films are not available here. Sure, because of the large Cantonese population over here, the Hong Kong films are no problem. But I'm more interested in Japanese cinema. Can you help me? Point me in the right direction. -- Mark Charles Antoine

When writing Japanese Cinema, Yuko and I quickly realized we couldn't include all the Nippon movies ever made. And even though we managed to cover almost 1500 films, we were forced to ignore thousands more (many of which are personal favorites). Essentially, for that book, our goal was to highlight the "most important" films encompassing each genre. Currently we've begun work on volumes in an extensive encyclopedic collection. For example, we will produce one book dedicated exclusively to all the Japanese Horror Films.

and another for Pink Films, etc. The movie you mentioned, Inferno Of First Love [Hatsukoi Jigokuhen], will certainly be included in our forthcoming Sex Book. This modern fairy tale was directed by Susumu Hani; it stars Akio Takahashi and Kuniko Ishii as two adolescents who fall in love and lose their innocence after moving to Tokyo from from the countryside.

Regarding your dilemma about the availability

of Japanese films: Even though the United States deesn't have strict 'video nash' laws like the UK, the motion pictures aren't any easier to find. Obviously, because of our close relationship with Video Search Of Miami, we would recommend them. VSoM does provide English subtitled versions of many Japanese films, including All Night Long. Write to them for a free catalog: VSoM, PO Box 16-1917, Miami FL 33116.

If you can't afford to purchase videos, we'd recommend that you do some late-night computer-suffing on the web or America On Line. There are lots of people who are anxious to do some video trading. You'll even find some genre fans who just want to show off and they'll give you videos for free in exchange for attention.

Dear Tom--

Thanks for ATC #10. It's the first magazine I have devoted to Bruce Lee. Do you remember the tabloid "Star" and their first issue in the mid 70s. It also featured Bruce Lee-- which I no longer have due to being too young at the time to protect if from-- you probably know who.

Eventually I will subscribe, but for now I'm just buying the old issues. Someday I'll pick up the new issues and see what I've been missing. So long.

--Phillip Krantz

It takes all kinds of people to make up a world.

Dear sirs:

I make low budget horror films, like the Jap rape direct-to-video stuff. Care to see some of it?

--Mike Johnson

We'd all be better off if you put your video camera back on the shelf. Please lose our address.

To the editor--

Now that Asian Cult Cinema has grown into a real magazine (with #14), may I suggest that you take one more step towards legitimacy. Get rid of the gratuitous nudity.

The back cover makes me cringe. I'm not a fuddy-duddy, but as a woman, I'm reluctant to purchase the magazine. I'm even more reluctant to read it in public. I take the subway to work everyday and I enjoy reading magazines while I commute. One time I took a

copy of Asian Cult Cinema and the entire time I was reading it I could feel the eyes of other passengers. A man sitting across from me even winked at me everytime I looked up. I think you're beginning to see what I mean. The magazine would be better without the nudity. —Ooris Freeman.

ACC:

Sure. I'm not stupid. I know #14 is a major improvement over the previous ones. I'm also aware of the high calibre of writers now contributing to ACC. But the greatest... the best... thing about the magazine is the incredible backcover. You can take all the glibberish about "The Psycho Junkie and his Tradition in Film" and stick it in a room with Shing Fui-On. Just continue giving me backcovers like the one on #14. I would kill for more nictures of biblike Mutsuds

No matter what happens don't stop this hallowed tradition of back-cover beauties. I remember when European Trash Clinema used to do great back covers. Now, they fill it with gawdawful pictures of guys like Franco and Ciccio (f). Don't let this horribe "political correct" disease infect you toro.

--Robert Cashill

To whom it may concern:

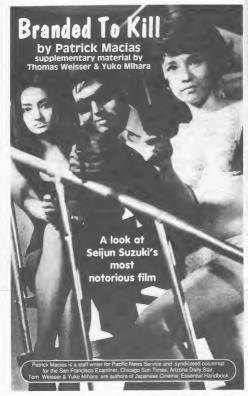
I am now receiving a subscription from your company. Due to a new regulation which is going into effect immediately, all issues of magazines and books received by a Corrections Institution which are 'sexually explicit' or have nude pictures can not be received. Dead-line is December 30. 1996.

If it is possible, can my un-used portion of the subscription be cancelled? I wish to receive the amount due to me if possible. Sorry about the problem that's now happening, but it affects all institutions in the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (Congress Regulation). — Name Withheld

Well, it might mean that prison inmates can't subscribe to our magazine anymore. And, possibly, a few women may feel uncomfortable reading ACC on the subway, but-- We have no intention of discontinuing our current policy of backcover nuclity.

There is something to be said for tradition.

ACC encourages letters from it's readers.
Write to: ACC, Box 16-1919, Miami FL 33116



Asian Cult Cinema

9

Branded To Kill

Koroshi No Rakuin (1967)

directed by Seijun Suzuki starring Jo Shishido • Mariko Ogawa • Mari Annu Isao Tamagawa • Koji Nanbara

The major discovery for Asian cineophiles during the last couple of years. has been Japanese director Seljun Suzuki. A recent traveling exhibition of his films, culled from major and minor works during the 1960s, played to capacity audiences at shortrun theaters and art houses across the USA. For those weaned on John Woo and Hong Kong actioners, the temptation to seek out more Asian films about guns and

gangsters proved irresistible. While Suzuki's work has been received favorably, it's my gut feeling that he's now one of the least understood and overrated names in Japanese cinema.

While Suzuki was admirably prolific during his tenure as a staff director at Nikkatsu Studios during the 1950's and 1960's, the bulk of his filmography consists of minor, frustrating, and selfdeprecating B-films. The problem was that Suzuki didn't eniov what he was doing. Stuck with the task of having to grind out teen-idol films from predictable scripts. Suzuki's boredom with his own films eventually turned into a desire to sabotage them. Consider the sudden, inexplicable dust storm in Go to Hell Youth Gangs! (1960) or the incongruous use of red lighting in Kanto Wanderer (1963) These brief flashes, always stunning and unexpected, have become the focus for much of the American praise of Suzuki's films.

Suzuki's reputation as a world class director rests safely on the strength of his later lims, when the stylistic intrusions of his earlier work moved to the foreground. With films like Gate of Flesh (1964) and Tokyo Dritter (1965) he gave up on being an unhappy B-movie director and finally made the films he always wanted to; a modern kabuki, at once colorful, lysergic, confusing, surreal and godless.

BRANDED TO KILL overview Like the previous Tokyo Drifter and Elegy To Violence (both 1966), this surrealistic film about a Yakuza hitman was ravaged by Japan's mainstream press. And casual filmopers left the theater scratching their heads as they wondered what they had just seen. Today Branded To Kill is considered one of the greatest Japanese films. But in 1966, it was the last straw for the controversial director. After 39 Nikkatsu movies over a ten year period. Seljun Sukzuki found himself unemployed. Following years of constant fights and reprimands, the studio finally lowered the boom. don't need a director who makes movies nobody understands, Nikkatsu president Kyusaku Hori in an

Suzuki sued the company for breach of contract and he publicly ridiculed the studio executives. The whole thing was settled out of court. However, the other studios generally condemned Suszuki's law suit as "unacceptable behavior" earning him a reputation as a troublemaker. Nikkatsu issued a moratorium on all of his movies.

angry statement to the press.

Allenated, the director dropped from sight. He became a recluse, denying interviews. Ten years later, he returned with an independent production Story OF Grief And Sorrow (1977), a boxoffice disaster. However in 1980, he won the Nippon Academy Award for Zigeunerwisen, the belginning of his comeback.

-Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara

(continued from previous page)

The studio heads at Nikkatsu hated the films, saving that audiences couldn't understand them. The pressure was put on Suzuki to make his next picture a solid, coherent auctioner, lest he be handed his walking papers. The film that followed, Branded To Kill, got Suzuki fired from the studio. It temporarily killed his career but left behind a beautiful corpse; a boldly avant-garde tribute, parody, put-down, and black hearted celebration of the Yakuza / crime genre that spawned him. But that's just the subtext, all that's evident on the screen is image, style, and mood. Imagine David Lynch and Nicolas Roeg doing a free jazz improv on the Tattooed Hitman in glorious black and white widescreen. Soaked in rain and clouded in steam, it's a noirish story of a killer-for-hire who

is slowly losing his mind. . Hanada Goro, played by Nikkatsu's and Suzuki's puffy-faced regular Shishido Jo, is the number three ranked killer-for-hire in Japan. He's hired by the Yabuhara gang to pull off a series of hits on members of a diamond smugaling ring. After 3 perfect kills, Hanada's final job is muffed when a butterfly lands on his gunsight. Everyone turns on him; his wife, his gang, and Misako, a dark beauty with whom Hanada has fallen into a fatal "kiss me. kill me" relationship. The once stoic hitman begins to crack under the pressure, his cool gives way to drinking and hallucinations. His downward spiral hits rock bottom when Misako is kidnapped and tortured by the gang. Then out of the woodwork appears the legendary Number One Killer, the highest ranked killer in Japan. He is going to kill Hanada -- so he says -- but he only exhausts him with cruel cat and mouse games. Thinking that Misako is dead, Hanada is jolted out of his stupor when he discovers that she is still alive. Why

But Is There Any Other Film Like BRANDED TO KILL?

INFLATABLE SEX DOLL
OF THE WASTELANDS
[Koya No Dacchi Waifu]
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
ATSUSHI YAMATOYA

STARRING NORIKO TATSUMI, SEKIJI MARO

by Patrick Macias

It is strange to think that there could be another film quite like SeijunSuzuki's extraordinary Branded To Kill, but Inflatable Sex Doll Of The Wastelands is just that. Both movies are caustic black and white crime noint; hard-boiled; existential, absurdist, profound, and profane. Written and directed by Atsushi Yamatoya, who o-wrote Branded's enigmatic screenplay, the similarities are enough to suggest that Branded was as much Yamatoya's show as it was Suzuki's. Almost inseparable from each other, think of the two films as two different trips through the same black cryotic territory.

In the desolate countryside, a businessman meets with a down-and-out private eve. Seems his wife has been kidnapped by a shadowy gang, and he hires themousy but trigger-happy P.I. to track her down. The gang has sent them a homemade snuff film of the wife being raped and killed by hooded tormentors (In a scene nearly identical to one in Branded. the two coidly view the arim little film-within-a-film). When the detective begins to pursue the case, he finds that the wife is still alive. Faithful to the pulp tradition, he impulsively decides he wants for her for his own. With fantasies of killing the husband and spending tranquil afternoons at the beach with her, the detective himself assaults and rapes the poor woman. She

INFLATABLE SEX DOLL OF WASTLANDS continued from previous page

is prostate (laid out on a slab), which makes it impossible for either the P.I. or her gang of abductors to ever really possess or affect her. In a bloody raid on the gang's hideout, easily the film's tour de force, the private eve eliminates the hooded captors one by one. He is reunited with his comatose beauty and. with the help of the nearly dead gang leader, revives her for a bout of love making. During the reciprocated act, he magines her as a lifeless plaster mannequin. Suddenly, more crooks burst into the room. The lovers both undergo violent deaths as the detective's hody is riddled with bullets and knives and the woman is given a lethal injection. The film then flashes back to a slightly different version of the first meeting between the businessman and the detective, the camera pans across room after room of living, sleeping sex dolls: school girls, brides, geishas, and office girls. The detective fires his gun point-blank right into the camera. before the screen goes black accompanied by frenzied jazz music

Clearly inspired by the French New Wave, Yamatoya used cinematic incoherence to question the rules of gerre itself. His is a world where the cities and countrysides are haunted with people, not ghosts. At work is an almost cosmic separation of the sexes, making every act of desire between man and

woman an exercise in despair. Roughed up with gritty, impatient hand-heid camera-work. Wasteland's visual style isn't nearly as stunning as Suzukl's. Bare and seldom accompanied by a musical score, or even sound effects, it's almost totally stripped of extravagance. With all the irrationality and none of the ebullience, Wasteland is the much darker, perhaps less rewarding film. Yet any opportunity to visit Yamatoya's exquisitely blighted landscapes should be embraced. It's a strange relic of a cinema past: it should be seen not just for admiration, but for Inspiration.

BRANDED TO KILL review continued from previous page

shouldn't he become the number one killer and get the girl, Hanada figures. Thus, the stage is set for the final showdown between hunter and hunted in an abandoned boxing arena. But the final, cruel word is Suzuki's as the screen fades into nothingness.

Branded To Kill is fascinating and maddening viewing. Just when it threatens to come together and make sense, Suzuki makes for the Twilight Zone, driving the camera into bullet wounds and jumping the narrative ahead by days, weeks, months... who knows how much time has passed? If Suzuki's brilliance has finally triumphed over his boredom, it is because his cinematic bag of tricks is firmly roted in the form of the film tiself. Just like Hitman Hanada, Branded To Kill is insane, incoherent, and fractured.

Suzuki lays it on thick and the visual dolights are legion: hysterical rear screen projections that dare to draw attention to their own illusion; the film itself, printed in negative stock; and the mocking, insistent symbolism of rain and dead butterflies overwhelming the numerous trysts of Hanada and Misako

In perfect pitch too are the performances of the cast. As Hanada, Jo Shishido is the emotional core of Branded, Only Jo could make a hitman who sniffs steaming rice for sexual arousal so endearing and (dare I say it?) believable. The beautifu Mari Annu, born of Japanese/Indian parentage, makes Misako into one of the great femme fatales of the screen, the living embodiment of the unattainable object of desire and perhaps death itself. Completing the trio is Koji Nanbara as the Number One Killer. The best hitman in Japan sets a new standard for cold and cruel: so dedicated to his job that he sleeps with his eyes open and would rather piss in his pants than get up to go to the bathroom.

Branded To Kill is an exceptional film, even for Suzuki; baffling, maddening, and ingenious in spades. It is the essence of dozens of crime and gangster films boiled down to one unforgettable fever-dream.

a Fistful of Reviews

bu Waaner James Au

Critic Wooner James Ru has compiled another list of HK mini-reviews for the ACC readers: this listing is alphabetical

All Men Are Brothers ...

With Tony Leung, as a warrior whose lovalty to a fellow fighter is stretched to the hilt. The fight scenes are more like a montage barrage of flying, springing closeups. with little comprehensible choreography. A slow, uninvolving story and non-committal direction doesn't help matters.

Black Cat 2 ● ○

Jade Leung returns as the Nikita-like robot assassin, directed by Stephen Shin. Some nice action scenes weighted down by a weak plot, and bizarre look-a-likes of

George Bush and Boris Yeltsin.

A cast of stars couldn't make this any less stupid than it is. Someday, someone will explain to me why Tony Leung Kar Fai exits the room doing somersaults anytime someone speaks Mandarin.

Bride With White Hair

Swords and romance flash with equal effectiveness in this beautiful fantasy starring.g Leslie Cheung and Brigitte Lin and

directed by Ronnie Yu. Butterfly and Sword ● ● ○

Michelle Yeoh and Tony Leung Chiu Wai in a semi-tragic historical film, featuring some very odd fight choreography that includes a bouncing soccer ball.

Burning Paradise • • •

A very cool Ringo Lam movie, and as a change of pace for him, a historical Shaolins-on-the-run film. Most of it takes place in this huge temple of doom with diabolical traps and an evil monk. Startling fight choreography, excellent production values. It also includes the great line, velled by one guy in the middle of this huge kung fu brawl, "Hev, who grabbed my dick?

China's Last Eunich

Deciding that the way out of poverty is a job at the palace, a village boy makes the oddest career choice in history; to be a court eunuch. The castration scene, while not graphic, will make you kiss the ceiling. So will his realization, when he arrives to the Forbidden City, that the Emperor has heen overthrown

Eastern Condors ● ● ○

Samo Hung's version of Dirty Dozen, he

and a band of criminals are sent into Vietnam to blow an old stockpile of American missiles. It has its fans, but

many will be put off by the brutality, and



motion in just about every scene, killing our immediate involvement with the moment.

Executioners ••0 This sequel to Heroic Trio, starring

Maggie Cheung, Michelle Yeoh, and Anita Mui, is lackluster, It does however feature a scene with all of them in a bubblebath. Directed by Ching-Siu Tung.

Fire Dragon ••

Brigitte Lin's last film has no discernible second act of any interest. But the story. such that it is, of palace intrigue and rebellion, features a beginning and end that are whirling, ferocious, and effectively wired. Master director Yuen Woo-Ping stages the climax in a field of wine barrels, and with Lin unleashing tiny fire pellets from her hands in mid-air, it becomes a battle among spreading sheets of napalm.

Wagner James Au is a reviewer for Salon. Wired and Stim Magazines: he lives in San Francisco He has requested for us to publish his E-Mail address for correspondence: wjamesau @well.com

Flirting Scholar ••• Stephen Chow as a scholar who'll do anything to win the love of Gong Li, that luminescent Mainland China heart-breaker

Like all Chow's movies, frantic and silly, and this time, inventively so.

Iceman Cometh ...

Yuen Biao is a Ming dynasty royal quardsman pursuing rapist Yuen Wah across time, to modern HK. Excellent fight scenes, and nicely played comic touches.

Starring wise guy Stephen Chow, a slow, uneven historical comedy about a defamed scholar who reclaims his repute the hard way. It features an amazing parade scene on the Great Wall, though, Magic Cop ...

A real delight, entirely ingenious. Veteran star Lam Ching Ying is a modern-day Confucian cop who fights the criminal dead with elaborate rituals and hexes. His chief enemy is a lovely sorceress played by Japanese star Swenwara Mandoka. and their series of battles mix flashy. inventive wire martial arts with low-budget but entirely effective special effects.

Magnificent Warriors •••

One of Michelle Yeoh's better films, a high-flown Indy Jones-style adventure with a huge cast. Made in the mid-80's she still has a trace of baby fat, so she comes off as surprisingly girlish. The story and its execution is pure hambone.

Pom Pom And Hot Hot

If you sit through some sixty minutes of the stupidest, lamest comedy and police interrogational scenes, you'll be rewarded with several gunfights ingeniously-staged and entirely outrageous. With Jackie Cheung and great vet Lam Ching Ying.

Painted Faces • • •

A very watered-down telling of Jackie Chan, Yuen Biao, and Samo Hung's formative years in Beijing Opera School. According to all of them, the strict rigors portrayed here don't even come close to the ass-tarring harshness that made them martial arts masters. Still, a nicely bittersweet movie. Samo Hung is excellent. playing his own teacher.

Project S ● ●

A sequel of sorts to Supercop (aka Police Story 3). Michelle Yeoh reprises her role as super PRC cop. Some exciting action scenes are weakened by annoying use of high-speed filming. Jackie makes a brief cameo in drag

Red Wolf . Hollywood originally wanted to stage Die Hard 3 on a luxury ocean liner. This HK film followed through with that threat, but weakly.

Reincarnation of Golden Lotus ● ● O Clara Law's film about a young woman (Joey Wong) with an old soul that cannot forget her past life is beautifully filmed.

but contains not one likeable character. Royal Tramp • • •

Stephen Chow wises off in the imperial palace, masquerading as a eunuch in a script that of course features gags about severed members floating in pickled water. Lots of fun. But not recommended as an introduction to the genre.

Savior Of The Soul O

An overstylish production does not adequately improve a story that moves in slow motion. A modern-day swordsmanship film. Anita Mui battles the villainous Aaron Kwok with a weapon that can curl around like a tape measure. Andy Lau. Sex And Zen •••

For adults only, a retelling of an old Chinese erotic story has some of the most hilarious scenes in an HK film, interspersed with surprisingly hot soft-core action. Deciding that he will take his fill of mistresses, a young scholar decides to upgrade his equipment by transplanting his with that of a horse. Amy Yip is the gorgeous wife he spurns to do this, and you'll wonder why the whole film.

Wonder Seven ● ○

A surprisingly lame kid's action film from Ching Siu-Tung (director of Chinese Ghost Story), starring Michelle Yeoh. By the time you get to the amazing fight around a chopper on top a skyscraper. you're too put off by the flat characters and thin plot to care. The cast, and audience deserves better.

CYBERPUNK

The New Face Of Horror in Japanese Cinema

The idea of humans turning into machines is as old as the industrial Age itself. Before complex metal machines were prevaient, men supposedly turned into wolves, snakes, birds, even insects, i.e., Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Franz Kafka's famous story, Metamorphosis, What was truly odd about Kafka's story, though, was his choice to make Gregor more human as an insect than he ever

Gregor finds a peace and understanding with himself that could never have been possible had he remained human. The films in what might loosely be called Japan's "cyberpunk" genre take the opposite, and more common, point of view-that a man turned into or merged with a machine eventually loses all semblance and hope of humanity. Though this idea is certainly not new, the execution of these films is. Owing much to the nightmarish sets, hopeless atmosphere. non-linear plotting, and horribly absurd and violent situations and dialog of David Lynch's Eraserhead, these films, especially those directed by Shinya Tsukamoto, adhere faithfully to the tenant that "form follows content."

While the term "cyberpunk" is often used to describe recent American fare such as Johnny Mnemonic and Virtuosity, the term finds its true definition in Japan's Tetsuo: Iron Man, Tetsuo 2: Body Hammer, Tokyo Fist, Pinnochio 964 and Death Powder. These films alone in world cinema. excepting Eraserhead and David Cronenberg's Videodrome, successfully creates the visceral impact, the horror and revulsion necessary to carry science.

fiction of this magnitude. These films are not slick Hollywood product, but independent projects that make outstanding use of comparatively low budgets. Seldom do today's science fiction films, no matter their budget. please anyone anymore. Johnny Mnemonic, for example, is a cool ideait even boasts a screenplay by William Gibson, the inventor of the term "cyberpunk"- but what might have been something fnghtening and original has been locked into traditional Hollywood "chase movie" conventions. There is nothing remotely surprising or original about 99% of the film. Not so with Japan's take on this new and exciting genre

The foremost director of these films is Shinya Tsukamoto. His Tetsuo: Iron Man is the first of three that set the conventions for all that follow. Like Lynch and Cronenberg before him. Tsukamoto seamlessly blends his characters' realties with their nightnares and hallucinations. The differences between the two states become so slight that the viewer isn't sure which is which, and that, of course, is the point. We realize with port off ascination that, metaphorically and literally, we are all in danger of falling into the traps of alienation and himmaniinto the traps of alienation and himmani-

ty the characters find themselves in. Tetsuo is a perfect example of how to make a SciFi "art" film. The first threequarters of the film contain some of the scariest and most disgusting social comment realized in recent cinema. The main character (nameless here), for no apparent reason, is becoming part of his landscape- he is becoming a machine. The black and white cinematography and lack of expository dialog add much to the atmosphere of unrelenting dread and doom consuming the character as he slowly and excruciatingly becomes a metal monster. By the time his dick turns into a power drill when he tries to make love to his horrified girlfriend, viewers should be sufficiently exhausted emotionally. I was.

Does it all make sense? Not really. But it doesn't have to. In everyday life, we are surrounded by machines we don't understand. We may have a rudimentary knowledge of how a certain machine works— pour gas into an engine and it nuns-but most of us are at a complete loss when a malfunction occurs. In the film's reality, this idea is taken to the extreme. Viewers can follow the progression of the plot, but that progressions logic is a mystery. And Tsukamoto makes it work. The humor at film's end distracts a bit from the realistic gloom of

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Richard Kadrey, who wrote the companion critique on Tokyo Fist, is author of the international bestseller Counterculture Handbook (St Martins Press) and he reviews movies and videos for Wired Magazine



its beginning, but the humor is so black and the special effects so interesting to watch that this is a minor criticism. Overall, **Tetsuo** is an important and entertaining film.

Tetsuo 2: Body Hammer isn't quite as interesting, but is still far more exciting than most of the SciFi films I've seen lately. The story this time is given a more traditional frame. The plot, for instance, finds an evil cult after Iron Man's DNA so. that they may create an army of Iron Men to take over the world, Iron Man here is given a name. Tomoo Taniguchi. a wife and child, and a payroll clerk's job. When the cult kidnaps and kills Taniguchi's son, he... well, I bet you can figure it out. Tetsuo 2 is also in color, which just isn't as metaphorically interesting as the black and white deadness of #1. All this detracts a great deal from the mystery and imagination of the first film. I wish Tetsuo 2 had been made as a separate film altogether, as it would work better without a sequel's insistence that the viewer make connections and comparisons to the earlier work. Still, the film is thought-provoking and fun to watch and does boast a better final scene (obviously inspired by Planet Of The Apes) than the original; after the climactic hattle between the cult and Iron Man. Tsukamoto flashes forward a bit in time to reveal a now human Taniguchi strolling peacefully with his wife and (somehow resurrected) child next to the smoldering ruins of the city.

What is surprising to me is that Tsukamoto's third explication of the man/machine motif is perhaps his finest. Tokyo Fist melds the wild inventiveness of Tetsuo with the more traditional aspects of Tetsuo 2 and comes out a winner. This time the characters' transformations into machines are not literal. There are no metal rods or armor plates growing from or into flesh. Here, the characters remain human on the outside. but become mechanical nonetheless. In order to win back his masochistic girlfriend (who, like many of today's hipsters, isn't happy without as many body piercings as possible) from a brutal champion boxer. Tsuda transforms himself from a fairly meek nice guy into a wicked killing machine. While more realistic in most areas than the other two films, the violence on display here is still crazily surreal and the plot does demand attention. By disposing of the more explicit science fiction elements. Tokvo Fist emerges as Tsukamoto's most frightening film to date. The characters' dehumanization of themselves in the name of power and perfection hits a home-run emotionally- and you'll never think of working out at a gym in the same way again.

A direct descendant of the Tsukamoto films. Shozin Fukui's Pinnochio 964 is also an excellent exploration of the man/machine motif. Through genetic manipulation, Pinnochio 964 is transformed from a man into a cyborg sex slave who is later thrown out by an unsatisfied master. Unable to function on the mean streets of Tokyo, he is befriended by a young homeless woman. When her efforts to help Pinnochio remember who and what he is-and what he has become-succeed. I guess the phrase "carnage ensues" adequately describes the film's concluding segments. In plot developments that mirror Robocop, Pinnochio finds that what little humanity he has left is driving him insane. Unlike Robocop, however, Pinnochio does not come to terms with his new state of being. He gets pissed. Really pissed. While this may sound on paper like traditional SciFi "revenge" fare Pinnochio 964 is much more akin to Tetsuo than Body Hammer. It is compelling in its non-linear editing, surreal set design, and disgusting use of bodily fluids for metaphoric rather than literal gore effect purposes. Again, the fact that all the scenes, taken separately, don't add up to a coherent plot doesn't detract from the film's portrayal of dehumanization in the modern world. The hateful voraciousness of Pinnochio's former master, for example, is a perfect portrait of how instant gratification of all desires is becoming a way of life for many of us. You can bet that if cyborg sex slaves were available today, there would also be masters like this woman.

Shigenu Izumiya's Death Powder is, by turns, one of the most and least inter-

esting of these films. It, like the others. contains exceptional technical prowess (all the more exceptional here considering Isumiva's tiny budget). But the film is so insistent in obscuring any coherence of plot that I found watching it a joy, but trying to follow it aggravating. Tsukamoto and Fukui get lots of mileage by given out infrequent but existent signposts to follow. Death Powder is a bit too much like a trip on the drug the film is named after for my tastes. I wish it simply celebrated its plotlessness like Bunuel and Dali's Un Chien Andalou. Then one could relax and let the images flow However, Death Powder does seem to want us to follow something more than just its scary imagery. But other than the fact that the drug Death Powder first makes one feel like God, then kills the user. I couldn't decipher much. I'm still hesitant to make this a major criticism though, as I did enjoy looking at the film and would recommend viewing it-especially if one indulges in hallucinogenics from time to time.

Whatever criticisms I've made in the course of this article are overshadowed by the fact that these films, Death Powder included heat the hell out of their American and European counterparts. Had these filmmakers depended on US/Euro backing, the films would never have been made. They require far too much physical and emotional endurance for the average Star Trek fan. Whether or not the term "cyberpunk" has any relevance in describing them, believe these films are the future of science fiction cinema. They are visually intoxicating and metaphorically frightening, without being ostentatious.

FLESH & BEYOND: TOKYO FIST by Richard Kadrey

FLESH. It's the center of Shinya Tsukamoto lims, the core of his air. Flesh and bodies in motion, in forment, in transformation. Some of the bodies are beautiful. Some are terrifling, Most are both. All the bodies are tragile: sacks of blood and bone, easily punctured. Easily invaded. There is always something outside these bodies trying log pet in. Or vice versa. [continued on] In Tsukamoto films such as Tetsuo:
Iron Man, Tetsuo 2: Body Hammer and
Tokyo Fist—and even in his early short
films—there has always been tension
between the border of our bodies and
the outside world. It's the eternal tension
between organic and the inorganic
worlds. The metal fetishist in Tetsuo
inserts a section of threaded pipe into lines the
tileg. The vicinitized Salaryman of Tetsuo
2 sprouts metal after his skin is punctured by a opeumatic syrince.

The body invasions in his latest film. Tokyo Fist, are more obvious and the characters are more complicit in their own pain. The movie centers around the ritualized and fetishistic world of boxing. In this film, the organic slams into the organic doing the damage that was done by the inorganic materials in his other films. Of course, the inorganic objects were just stand-ins for the pressures of modern life, obsessions and body fears as our machines become more and more a part of our daily existence: Computers, VCRs, gas permeable contact lenses, pacemakers, titanium replacement hips, metal

security detectors, beepers, pagers, cell phones, voice mail—So even though Tokyo Fist features organic entities-men and women-beating each other to pulp, they are doing it as a reaction to the pressures of their lives and the brutality of the world (in this case, the memory of the rape and murder of a

young woman). The inorganic is present in the setting of the murder-a freeway overpass, a mass of hard geometric lines and drab concrete slabs. Everything is colorless and inhuman there, especially the rapists who have become one with the hard landscape. The only thing that breaks the spell is the reinvasion by the organic

world into the scene when the young woman falls and begins to bleed.

And there is a literal invasion of metal into flesh in Tokyo Fist. too. Tsukamoto's most complex film, it's also the one that also plays with his ideas and symbols in new ways. Hizuru, the woman at the center of the love triangle that propels the film forward turns on her own body. She begins with a tattoo on her upper arm, a taboo act for a woman in polite Japanese society. She tears out her earrings and repierces her ears with red hot pokers, terrifying even the hardened boxer with whom she's having an affair. She inserts metal bars into her chest and arm. Hizuru's personal body invasions are

the most complex and ambivalent of any in Tsukamoto's films. The collision of metal and Hizuru's body, for her, is both fascination and disgust. Examination and punishment. An attempt, finally at transcendence. She's surrounded by men obsessed with pushing their bodies to the limit. Though Hizuru is strong, she can never challenge the men on their own turf: the boxing ring. In the end, she doesn't want to. The bovish, ritualized violence of boxing, of one man trying to dominate another, eventually bores her. She remains fixated on her body, however, understanding what the men only dimly perceive: that it can be a vehicle of change, of figurative and literal transcendence. At the end of Tokyo Fist.

> Hizuru's ritual removal of the metal from her flesh is the most explicitly religious moment in any Tsukamoto film. While characters in all his movies have gone beyond flesh (i.e., the salarymen mutated into industrial scrap cyborgs in both Tetsuo films). Hizunu's *de-invasion* of her body is unquestionably a positively transcendent act. At

ori Fujii trom Fokyo Fist



the end of the him, she moved beyond the need for invasion, something Tsukamoto's characters rarely do.

Watching Tsukamoto's movies is like channel surfing through some media junkie's unconscious. There are dozens of points of cultural reference in there. Rock Video, certainly. He's integrated the form very well into his work. There are also echoes of such American movie makers as David Lynch and the avant garde animators, Brothers Quay. Tsukamoto's use of texture, noise and music is a kind of MTV transformation of Lynch's techniques from Eraserhead. And the Brothers Quay are influential in their use of organic and inorganic objects in their Freud-on-acid-style animations such as Street of Crocodiles and Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies

Yukio Mishima's influence is in there. too. Probably the most perverse of Japan's great modern writers, some of Tsukamoto's loving depictions of bodies. such as the sweaty exercise sequences in Tetsuo 2 and Tokyo Fist, could have come straight out of Mishima's Sun and Steel. In fact. Mishima himself once posed for a book of photos- Ordeal by Roses- that juxtaposed his formidable physique with, among other things. rocks, tubing and metal.

A coincidence? Probably not.

Even if Tsukamoto has never read a word of Mishima, they're both working from the same source material, the same obsessions. They're both trying to confront the 20th century- which has seen some of Japan's highest highs and lowest lows- by slamming directly into it with their heads, shoulder and arms. They've invented their own kind of anxious millennial art religion, one which sees the body as the vehicle for enlightenment (not a new thought), not through denial or removal, but through confrontation. It a technological variation on American Indian and Hindu rituals. The Sun Dance, which rips open the dancer's skin and pectoral muscles. Kayandi Bearing, in which the supplicant is fitted with a cage of thin spears; walking or dancing while Kayandi Bearing plunges the spears into the wearer's body, creating states of agony, ecstasy and transcendence.

By taking the industrial, digital and pop detritus of our time and grafting it into the bodies of his characters, Tsukamoto is trying to take himself and his viewers into some new place, where the organic and the inorganic are no longer at war. There, we're all chimeras: mutant children of a new flesh

A Better Tomorrow 3

aka Love and Death in Saigon, 1989

director: Tsui Hark; cast: Chow Yun Fat,
Anita Mui, Tony Leung, Subitu Tokitu

Synopsis: During 1974. Mark (Chow Yun Fat) arrives in Saigon to persuade his uncle. Nhun Ai Duong, and cousin Mun (Tony Leung) to join him in Hona Kong. Rescued from corrupt customs officials by businesswoman Kit (Anita Mui), he meets Mun and witnesses a Viet Cono assassination attempt during a student anti-government demonstration. Realizing the necessity of black market activities to finance their departure from Saigon, Mark and Mun enlist Kit's help against treacherous A.R.V.N. authorities. After customs officials nearly cause Nhun's death from a heart attack by a brutal search of his lucque. Kit arrives to help them. In Hong Kong, Mark and Mun watch a TV news bulletin covering Watergate and its effect on South Vietnam's precarious situation. Learning of her involvement with Mark, Kit's gangster lover Ho blows up the new family business causing Nhun's death. Sympathizing with the bereaved cousins, Kit decides to return to Vietnam with Ho and avenge Nhun's death. Ho enlists corrupt A.R.V.N. officer Bong in retrieving his Salgon assets before the North Vietnamese enter the city. Mark and Mun return to Saigon, After several battles Ho dies white Bong seriously wounds Kit. The cousins finally reach the airport minutes before the North Vietnamese, boarding the last helicopter leaving Saigon. As they lift off, Kit dies of her wounds.

motion picture
overview is
reprinted from
Vietnam War
Films
(McFarland &
Co), a 1994 text
written by regular ACC contributor Tony
Williams

and Jean-

The preceding



VIETNAM VIA HONG KONG by ERIK J HUGHES

In America, there are basically two types of Vietnam War films. One (Coming Home, Deer Hunter, et all primarily deals with the conflict inside the characters: the most common example is coping with the traumatic effects of the war. The other type, exemplified by Coppola's Apocalypse Now, concerns itself with personalities within a war environment, i.e. the conflict erupts between the megalomanical Colonel Kurtz and the cynical assassin sent to kill him. Their battle of wills escalates until the climax. mirroring the madness and violence around them, serves as background to their more personal fight. It's also true of Oliver Stone's Platoon and Brian De Palma's Casualties Of War. This "interpersonal conflict in the midst of chaos" is characteristic of two popular Hong Kong films as well Tsui Hark's A Retter Tomorrow 3 and John Woo's Bullet In The Head

Both deal with friends or family members who try to capitalize on the insanity of the war by becoming black marketeers— reasoning that if they have no allegiances, they can straddle the fence and take advantage of the chaos from the sidelines— unaware that betrayal and death already lie in their wake.

and the death arready lie in their wake.

'Tm Chinesel I'm Hong Kong people' scream the protagonists of Bullet, as if that were enough to save them from the violence. The films are remarkably similar, but each director gives his themes their own subtle— and not so subtle—twists. A Better Tomorrow 3 takes a slightly more realistic and personal view of Vietnam. Not surprising, since director

continued on past page

A Comparison Of Tsui Hark's Better Tomorrow 3 With John Woo's

Bullet In The Head

Tsui was born and lived there for the first fifteen years of his life., linally emigrating to Hong Kong in 1966, around the time America became deeply intwined in the conflict. His understanding of the larcenous political climate is evident by how Mark (Chow Yun Fat) gets his cousin Mun (Tony Leung) out of jail (he bribes the guards), and how Kit (Anita Mui) helps Mark, his Uncle, and Mun out of Vietnam (she pulls strings with people she knows in Customs, framing a corrupt officer for taking bribes).

Stylistically, this film is interesting because it's essentially an homage to John Woo- the director with whom Tsui produced back-to-back hits with Tomorrow 1 and 2. But this one is a pre-quel, occurring before the first two. All of the Woo touches are there: sweeping camera work, quick cuts, iaw-dropping action; but director Tsui adds a few touches of his own. Case in point, the first (or second, or third, etc.) battle with Bong, the corrupt General. Here's highly saturated, but carefully sparse, lighting, acrobatic flights through the air, plus something very rare in the run-of-the-mill Hong Kong action films: strong, complex, and violent characterization of Kit, the black marketeer with whom Mark develops a relationship. She's the one who teaches the boys about armed combat, and it's SHE who gives Mark his famed black overcoat from Tomorrow 1 & 2

There is also the character of Pat, the young Vietnamese boy whom

continued on next page

Bullet In The Head 1990

director: John Woo; cast: Tony Leung, Jacky Cheung, Walse Lee, Simon Yam Synopsis: During 1967, Ben, Frank and Paul flee Hong Kong after killing racketeer Rippe, in a fight, After priving the Science

Ringo in a fight. After arriving in Saigon, they narrowly escape execution during a round-up, and decide to take on Vietnamese gangster Leung, with the aid of Eurasian hit-man Luke, Wishing to rescue Leung's Chinese mistress Sally, held against her will, the four engage in a machine oun battle. Although Leung shoots Sally in the back, they manage to escape Saigon, Sally dies when ARVN forces attack them in the countryside. Moving inland, the three become Viet Cong prisoners while Luke escapes, NVA interrogators torture the trio. Forcing Frank, and then Ben to shoot unarmed American soldiers, the trio play for time until Luke arrives with U.S. forces Wishing to escape with a gold stash. Paul shoots Frank in the head to prevent his insane ravings from informing the Viet Cong of their presence. Luke rescues Frank while Paul machine guns friendly villagers to steal a boat. Paul also shoots Ben and leaves him behind, Buddhist monks find Ben and care for him. Returning to Saigon, Ben encounters Luke again. He leads him to Frank. Dangerously insane from his head wound and heavily drug addicted, he pleads with Ben to kill him. Returning home in 1970. Ben finds his wife Jane has borne son named Frank. Seeking out Paul (now a successful gangster). Ben confronts him with Frank's skull. The two fight it out in a flurry of car chases and bullets before Ben avenues Frank with a bullet in the



the preceding synopsis is reprinted from Vietnam War Films (McFarland), a collection of reviews for 600 Nam oriented war

movies written by Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams. Uncle took in as a child because "he had nowhere else to go." By the end of the film, he has grown up, has become a soldier for the South Vietnamese, and, as Saigon falls, he rips off his uniform, vowing to stay behind to find his real family. He is the conscience of the film. A very human, down-to-earth conscience, delivering Tsui's farewell love-letter to Vietnam.

On the other hand, Bullet In The Head is epic, sweeping, and mythical— with 'right' and 'wrong' so blurred as to not matter anymore. In the end, all that matters is one's own sense of right and wrong, and one's own destiny. When Frank and Paul go into a jewelry shop to rob it, they are stopped during their get-

A Bullet In The Head

away by a group of soldiers leveling guns at them. They drop to the ground, and the soldiers open fire— at the store. The soldiers sack the place, and let the two go about

their business. "What a crazy fucking country", one of them says. It is a clear, succinct portrait of a country— and a people—out of control.

The characters can be seen as archetypes: Ben (Tony Leung), the heroic figure who storms through the final conflagration like an avenging angel; Frank (Jacky Cheung), reduced to committing contract hits for drugs to soothe the burning pain of the bullet lodged in his skull; and the villainous, single-minded Paul (Waise Lee), who carries his stolen chest of gold, everywhere he goes, like the Ancient Mariner carried the Albatross. The women are victimes, their pain is caused by simus.

stances beyond their control, in a war they never created. Even the ending in reminiscent of revenge tragedies by Calderon or Ben Johnson. Here are two men, once the best of friends, now worst enemies, in a combat which will allow poly one survivor.

John Woo was born in Guangzou, China, in 1946. Although he left with his family at the age of 4, the Mainland has kept quite a hold on him. In the film students are rebelling, lossing their little red books up into the air, plus Buddhist monks protest the war, and a young man stands defiantly in the path of a giant tank a la Tianenman Square. Woo's influences are apparent everywhere, from the execution of a young terrorist in

the street (perhaps the most famous series of images from the war), to the prisoner of war camp (obviously inspired by the similar, grueling scenes from Deer Hunter.

inspired by the similar, grueling scenes from Deer Hunter. He uses a sculpture of the Pleta to great effect, and he even lifts a scene from Tsul's Tomorrow 3 (i.e., the vinitro to Vietnam') bombing assassination; in Tomorrow 3 the sassasina are two oifs on a motorcycle.

while In Bullet they're one man on a

motorcycle and a boy with a shoe-shine

box). The whole effect lifts this already

classic film into the world of Epic Myth.
Both films are brilliant, moving, and
unforgettable. They also examples of
how, sometimes, artists are inspired by
the work of another (Tsui's Tomorrow 3,
an homage to Woo, was released in
1989; Woo's Bullet hit in 1990). These
two films would make an excellent dou-

victims— their pain is caused by circum ble bill some rainy Saturday afternoon. About the contributors for this series: Eink J Hughes graduated from Bennington College in 1993 and pursues an acting career dough, he also writes or 50 lo Magazine. Tony Williams is an Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at Southern litinois University and the author of many tilm oriented books; Jean-Jacous Majo is a freelone writer and translator, with a home to hoth France and Seattle



Asian Cult Cinema



Asian Cult Cinema



In 1970, at age 20, Miyuki Ono began her career as a model for for Shiseido, Japan's leading cosmetic company. Her decidedly non-Asian facial features and 57" starturg jave Miyuki instant cult status. Toel Studios signed her for Hot Wind 5000 CC, an entry in their Bunta Sugawara Trucker Series. She followed this film with a variety of projects including Time Slip (1980), Kiss Of Heaven (1983), Loving (1983), Saynora Jupiter (1985) & Evil Dead Trap (1986)

This important film, well worth tracking down, although before you do so, warned—you are going to be disappointed if you expect to find flying ghosts roaming around the same kind of mythical, cartoonish universe created by many similarly titled Hong Honk vehicles, and if you expect to find Joey Wang doing her usual ghostly stinf, forget it. Besides that, the film exhibits a severe lack of sex,

offers no nudity (except for a man falling out of his shower!), and features none of the horror fu combinations that enliven Samo Hung's Encounters of the Spooky Bunch, made in the same vear. So, you might ask, why the hell should I watch this movie? Well, be-Spooky cause Bunch intelligently

Bunch intelligently treats many of the themes that would come to be of such importance to the genre later on. It also has lots of fun, wild and wickedly subversive things going on in its own right.

On the face of it, director **Ann Hui** would appear to be a serious, much-respected filmmaker of adult "quality" dramas, whose output falls outside the domain of trash cinema. She started out in television before making her feature

film debut in 1979. As one of a number of young filmmakers who carved out a space for themselves in the industry after moving back to Hong Kong from a London film school.

SPOOKY
BUNCH

Hark's debut, Butterfly Murders. Since then, she has made such entirely worthy, interesting and responsible dramas as Boat People (1982), a film about the plight of Vietnamese refugees which has been banned since its initial release, Love in A Fallen City (1984), with Chow Yun-Fat doing his matinee-idol routine, Song Of The Exile (1990), with Maggle Cheung in another of her strong Maggle Cheung in another of her strong

dramatic roles, and American Grandson (1992), about a Chinese-American boy who visits his grandfather in Shanghai— a real tearierker.

On the other hand, Hui has also s o me t i me s amused herself by making entirely worthy, interesting, responsible and FUN genre pictures, such as her

to-be-recommended two-part sword and sorcery epic Romance Of Book And Sword (1986), and a thriller.Zodiac Killers (1992). Spooky Bunch, her second picture, indicates that a desire to make these kind of popular, trashy films ran through her veins right from the start. The film pretty much jump-started all the qhost centre activity of the 1980s.

One of its initial attractions is undoubtedly the presence of actress Josephine

> Siao in the starring role. She plays Ah Chee, an innocent young Cantonese Opera performer who becomes tangled up with spooks during a perfor-

mance trip to the

SPOOKY BUNCH (1980) directed by Ann Hui with Josephine Sigo

Ann Hui contributed to the making of HK Ch New Wave—that first film, The Secret, appeared at the same time as Tsui allo

Cheung Chau island of Hong Kong. Siao, who also produced the film, is allowed the opportunity to adopt a range of different roles during her comic turn as a woman possessed by spirits, and so to display once again the comic talents that have made her such a star in the settlement. (More recent fans may know Josephine Siao through her role as Jet Li's mother in Fong Sai Yuk (1993), but she has been starring in films since the late 1950s. Recently, her career was honored when the jury of the 1995 Berlin Film Festival gave her a Best Actress award for her role in Hui's latest film Summer Snow)

Spooky Bunch opens with a scene showing the opera troupe's procession through the streets. A little later, while onstage, the actors begin to be menaced by ghosts. No. 1, the chief male actor, is forced into "feminine" behavior after being taken over by a female spirit, Cat Shit. At the same time as these disturbances happen, Dick, the nephew of another troupe member called Uncle Dang, arrives from the nearby airport to prepare for his arranged marriage to Ah Chee. The characters soon find out that there are many ghosts in the vicinity. To be more precise, they discover that they are being targeted by a whole military parade full of soldiers (and Cat Shit, the prostitute associated with them) who were poisoned by Ah Chee's grandfather. They have now all come back to take their revenge by quaranteeing her family's infertility and death.

A number of bad things happen. Uncle Dang and another troupe member called Ma are executed by the ghostly soldiers. while Nick narrowly escapes a similar fate. As Nick and Ah Chee begin to fall in love. Cat Shit, who sometimes takes over Ah Chee's body, arranges for a midnight performance where the military will hope to destroy the ancestors once and for all by possessing No. 1's body as he performs a traditional Cantonese opera sword dance. As it happens, a monk whom Nick and Ah Chee had earlier tried to enlist in the battle to combat the spooks turns up at the eleventh hour

to rid the company of the ghosts. Once all have been banished. Nick and Ah Chee are free to wander off together. However, a final, ghostly apparition of Cat Shit reminds us that she is still at large, and has her ghostly eyes on the young lovers.

Spooky Bunch changed the terms of the Hong Kong ghost film in 1980 just as radically as the introduction of high-gloss eroticism and advanced special effects technology changed it in 1987. The film does this partly through the presence of Cat Shit, a mischievous, unruly female spirit, and partly by mixing together and parodying many different genre elements, such as the swordplay film and Cantonese opera. It also chooses to deal with traditional and modern Chinese themes through location shooting in a contemporary, rural setting, and therefore frees itself from the no-where, notime feel of the studio Chinese Ghost Story movies.

The film also plays on the dual woman as victim/woman as active agent conflict which informs so many recent genre ghost movies. The British critic and Hong Kong film guru Tony Rayns once suggested that Spooky Bunch parallels Ah Chee and Cat Shit, "presenting the ghost's ruthless malice as the inverted image of the heroine's daffy innocence." but it's also true to say that the presence of a ghost living through a woman allows that woman to openly express her sexual

desire for a man. Traditional notions of feminine decorum are overthrown when the possessed Ah Chee nails Nick with a suggestive kiss. And Ah Chee also goes against other forms of "correct" female behavior while possessed. At one point, she is listening to an English lesson on the radio. Mimicking the announcer's voice, she does linguistic violence to the way women are meant to behave. "This is a dish," says the male voice on the radio: "Dish." replies Ah Chee. "This is a fork." "Fuuurck!"

On the other hand, the subject of possession also allows Hui to present some male characters whose actions nush their behavior out of the realm of masculine decorum and into a trashy, campy imitation of women. This might be seen as another example of the sexual ambiquity that regularly finds its way into contemporary Hong Kona cinema. Cantonese movies often features gay themes and imagery (which is not surprising, given the preponderance of gay workers in the film industry), and gossip about the sexual preferences of Jackie Chan, Anita Mui, Danny Lee, Leslie Cheung, et al. does more than just provide an interesting topic for conversation. Such personnel provide the films they star in with moments of subversion and delight. If you are a life-hating homophobe, you had better avoid Spooky Bunch. Although not a "gay film." it offers jokes about male identity that you will probably only find funny if you are relaxed enough about gender roles to enjoy them. When Ah Chee possesses No I and the ghostly lieutenant possesses Uncle Dang, both men act in a theatrical, campy, "unmasculine" way. If Cat Shit parallels Ah Chee, then the machismo of the military men is also paralleled by the opera troupe's sexually-ambiguous theatrical performances. ALL the men in this film masquerade under some form of masculine identity, which tends to draw attention to the fake, constructed nature of those roles. Everyone is acting at "being a man" or "being a woman," whatever those terms may mean. Ann Hui does not have to resort to gay male stereotypes (as Tsui Hark does in Peking Opera Blues, for example) to signal the troublesome, playful identity of her male and female characters.

Spooky Bunch is a departure from the usual Hong Kong ghost movie in that it does not depend upon trick special effects or high wire stunt work to pop



open the eyes of its spectators, but relies instead on the skill of its actors and the invention of its camera compositions. Best of all, the great thing about the finished product is that it is NOT an "arty," serious work that has no trashy elements!

There is often a dramatic use of refocusing in camera to bring the spirit world together with the human world, as in the moment when Ah Chee first sees the ghostly frame of Cat Shit in a darkened alleyway. Hearing a strange noise, she turns around, at which point the camera pulls the shot's background into focus to reveal Cat Shit shrouded there in her cloak, surrounded by a barrage of white light. Then, just as abruptly, she is gone. Other scenes are equally well handled. Ghosts appear unexpectedly with maximum visual force.

Spooky Bunch is a mature, adult, contribution to the ghost film. The film is worth hunting down, both in its own right, and also to see what the genre, and some of the industry's key female personnel, were up to on Cheung Chau island as early as 1980.

Julian Stringer is a British-born film student, currently studying for a postgraduate degree at Indiana University; his reviews & critiques have been published in Film Quarterly and Sight And Sound





A CAREER PROFILE BY AUGUST RAGONE



SHINICHI "SONNY" CHIBA REAL NAME: SADAO MAEDA

Born: Fukuoka, Kyushu on January 23, 1939 Marital Status: Divorced from ex-wife Yoko Nogiwa Profession: Action Film Legend - Founder of the Japan Action Club - A Real Mean Bastard Favorite Actors: Steve McQueen and Alain Delon Most Famous Roie: Tetsu Tsurugi the Mercenary

in The Street Fighter movie series
MARTIAL ARTS QUALIFICATIONS:
Studied under Karate Koncho Baitatsu
Masatatsu "Mas" Oyama for five years
Leveis Obtained: 2nd-Dan Blackbeit in Judo
4th-Dan Blackbeit in Ninjutsu
1st-Dan Blackbeit in Kendo
1st-Dan Blackbeit in Shorjail Kempo

August Ragone, writer of this article, is editor of Markalite Magazine and regular contributor to Video Watchdog and G-Fan; he is an expert on Japanese Cinema, especially the Kaiju Eiga gen "An actor's body should be full of emotions whether it is happiness or sorrow, pain or joy, enraged or elated— you have to express yourself with your whole body. Japanese actors don't normally do this. What I'm doing is what every actor should be doing. Action is Drama. If we cannot make the audience laugh, smile or cry with us, we are not actors. It may be idealistic. but it's true" ...shinichi "sonny" chiba

Shinichi Chiba believes every word of it, but more importantly, he makes you believe it- he is one of the singularly intense action actors of all time. Where as Bruce Lee's persona was that of a sleek and deadly cat. Chiba's is that of an hyper-active, but none the less lethal, pitbull. Let's be truthful: Chiba's martial arts skills are brutish, as opposed to Lee's, but they seem more enraged. more brutal. You might not want to start a fight with Lee but, you'd NEVER want to cross Chiba. Even when he played amiable good-guys-watch out-you didn't envy the villains one bit when they'd piss him off. Nobody does it quite as badass as Chiba. Nobody.

The eldest of five children, and son of an army test pilot, Sadao Maeda and his family were transferred to a base in Chiba Prefecture just north of Tokyo) during World War II. He later adopted the name "Chiba" as his stage name. His devotion to physical action began in his youth when he aspired to enter the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as a gymnast by enrolling in the Physical Education Department of Nihon University. He also took on a part-time job in construction in which he injured his hipbone and forfeited his chances in the Olympics. It was then that he went on to audition and win Toel Studios' 1960 New Faces Contest. At 21. Shinchi Chiba's first assionment

that summer was from Toei TV
Productions in the Oizumi ward of
Tokyo. He was asked to take over actor
Susumu Wajima's role as "Kotaro" the



lead character on the popular superhero drama created by Kohan (Moonlight Mask) Kawauchi: Spectrum Mask (Nana-iro Kamen). The success of this assignment, lead him to be cast as the heroic star of Kawauchi's next vehicle: The Messenger of Allah (Ala no Shisha), later the same year. Both of these shows were more in line with the American Superhero Serials of the 1940's, than the more familiar Japanese superhero teleseries to follow. His constant high-profile on television launched him into motion pictures the next year. Toei's (short-lived) action film division-New Toei (Nivu Toei) - began priming Chiha as an Action Star. His initial vehicle was entitled The Drifting Detective (Furalbo Tantei), the first in a pair of films from debuting director Kinji Fukusaku (War Without Code series. Death of Honor, Tora! Tora! Tora!, The Green Slime et al.). Later that same year. Chiba returned to a superhero role with Koii Ota's Super Sonic Space Plane (Uchu Kaisoku-sen), known in the US as Invasion of the Neptune Men. Reportedly, his salary back then was around W60,000 (approximately \$170 US, 1960) per month, and since his rent was W40,000, he didn't have much to live on. These were hard knocks time, for besides being poor, his father who opposed his acting career, disowned him. But. Chiba, with the support of senior

actors at the studio (such as Yakuza Eiga Superstar Ken Takakura) forged on, and became the sensation of the long-running hit NET network series JNR Inspector #36 (JNR stands for Japan National Railway), which ran from 1962 to '67. During the hectic production of the of the show, which was shot all over the Japanese islands. Toei found time to squeeze him into another TV series-Darkness: 5th Degree (Kurayami Godan), a modern day karate version of Zatoichi- and the occasional action-picture. These include Fukusaku's Vigilante in the Funky Hat (Fuanki Hatto no Kaioji) and The W200,000-Amm (Nisenman-en no Wan), as well as Hailme Sato's Battle Beneath the Sea (Kaitei Dai-Senso aka Terror Beneath the Sea) and the live-action theatrical version of the pulp-cum-comic-cum animated series. Golden Bat (Ogon Batto) both in 1966.

It was in this period that Shinichi Chiba earned the nickname "Sonny"; the young actor was involved in the advertising campaign for a new model from Toyota, called the "Sunny." The ads were highly successful, and the name stuck with him- especially in the hands of Toei's overseas ad department. When JNR Inspector #36 ended its

nun (now as Railway Inspector #36) in July of 1967, Chiba was not idle longthe next year he found himself jet-propelled into fame assembled among a strong cast for one of the most popular Toei action series of all time: Key Hunter (Kii Hanta). This dream cast included Tetsuro Tanba, Hayato Tani, Hiroshi Miyauchi, Eiko Ogawa, and (Chiba's real-life spouse, now an ex). Key Hunter, a fuel-injected variation

on Mission: Impossible, really boosted Chiba's career as an action star. He had been featured in scores of films, but none paid him the kind of salary he was longing for until this series came along, "I was earing less than my own wife (Nogiwa), and that really bothered me. I desperately wanted my own series, and Key Hunter turned out to be a gem." Chiba put a great deal of time and effort into each episode. "I thought up all kinds of action scenes, and got involved in the writing of the scripts as well; at first they seemed rather dry to me, so I knew that I had to add my own 'spice' to them." Chiba's spice- healthy heapings of outrageous and delirious action sequences--helped the series run for five years and

150 episodes hour-long episodes!

The smash-popularity of the show helped Chiba to push the importance of action through the need of thoroughly trained stuntmen, and founded the Japan Action Club in 1969. Based in the Ebisu ward of Tokyo, JAC was created to provide able-bodied stuntmen/martial artists for any studio who was able to hire them. The organization has employed over 100 active members at a time, who are put through rigorous daily training & practice.

JAČ and Sonny Chiba Enterprises were able to launch a number of stuntmen/ women into super-stardom: as actors, singers and action-heroes through-out the '70s and '80s— alluminists include Etsuko "Sue" Shiomi and Hirovuki "Duke" Sanada.

About JAC, Chiba said: "The more I discovered idi action scenes, the more I discovered that the majority of Japanese actors werent physically fit for action pictures. It also became apparent to me, that if things continued this way, I was going to end up looking like a clown—because the other actors wouldn't be able to keep up with me. Actually, I created JAC so that Shinich Chiba could be successful!"

The popularity of Chiba and Key Hunter enabled the entrepening actor to create a string of television series for himself throughout the '70s, with even more attention to action than Key Hunter: these include The Bodyguards (Za Bodeigarudo). The Guerrilla-7 (Za Gorira Sebun), Blazing bragnet (Morero Sosamo), Emergency Line (Dai-Hijosen), and the dramn Anan-tro Tongarashi. It was also during this period that JAC was influential to the "Superhero Boom" on Japanese television—revolutionizing the action scenes for shows of this type.

During the last year of production on Key Hunter, Chiba came to the attention of Hong Kong Superstar Bruce Lee who was well known in HK from the show— and through mutual friends, they met to discuss a joint film project. Unfortunately, for all of us, the film was put off due to Chiba's tough TV schedule; eventually, when Chiba did agree to appear in the HK/Japanese co-production, Tokyo-Seoul-Bangkok (could this be The Soul of Bruce Lee?) in 1973, he had to postpone his arrival in HK by 10 days. And soon after his plane landed, he was shocked to hear the news that Bruce Lee had iust diev.

Chiba became inspired by Bruce's passion for intensity, and Toei Studios. seeing the enormous profits garnered by Enter the Dragon worldwide, decided it was time for the Japanese Martial Arts films to begin anew. Shigeo Ozawa's The Streetfighter (Kugeki! Satsujin-Ken). Teruo Ishii's The Executioner (Chokugeki! Jigoku-Ken), The Killing Machine (Shaorinji Kempo), Return of the Streetfighter (Satsujin-Ken 2). The Streetfighter's Last Revenge (Gvakushu! Satsuiin-Ken). Karate Inferno (Chokugekil Jigoku-Ken Dai-Gyakuten), The Bodyguard (Bodeigarydo Kiba Hissatsu Sanbon Tobe), Sister Streetfighter (Onna Hissatsu-Ken). Karate Warriors (Za Karate), Dragon Princess (Hissatsu Onna Kenshi). The Assassin (Marijuana Mitsubai Soshiki)are among the lot produced by the late '70s

It was during this hectic period that Chiba starred in a trilogy (very) loosely based on the life of his mentor Masutatsu Oyama (who died in 1994)this was adapted from the manga version Karate Baka-Ichidai (Crazy Generation of Karate), appearing in the pages of Shonen Magazine. In the series. Chiba essays the life, loves and struggles of his master (even as overthe-top, irrational and outrageous as they are. Ovama himself acted as technical advisor!). The results were The Champion of Death (Kenka Karate Kyokushin-Ken), Karate Bear-Fighter (Kenka Karate Kyokushin-Buraiken), and Karate for Life. Even members of Ovama's school appear as fighting extras in this trio of pictures.

As the Martial Arts Boom died down,



Chiba then starred in several films which contain little in the way of Karate, but were not lacking in the action and/or outrageousness department- such as wildly violent Doberman Detective (Doberuman Deka), a delirious version of the comicbook-cum-teleseries (the Toei boobtube version starred Chiba lookalike Toshio Kurosawa. A former member of the Toho bullnen, who was featured in such films as Catastrophe: 1999 and Battle of the Japan Sea). Chiba continued the comicbook films with Golgo 13: Kowloon Assignment (Gorugo 13 Kanuun no Kubi) and Wolfquv. the Enraged Werewolf (Unufugai Moero Okami-Otoko). Then there are his appearances in established film series. as a main quest-star in the first Detonation! Violent Riders (Bakuhatsu! Bosozoku) picture.

On top of all this, he made many appearances in equally violent Yakuza movies for Toei, such as Fight Without Honor: Deadly Fight in Hiroshima (Jingi-naki Tatakai Hiroshima Shito-hen), The Okinawan 10-Year War (Okinawa no Ju-nen Senso), Proxy War in

Hokuriku (Hokuriku Dairi Senso), and Yokohama Underworld: Machine Gun Dragons (Yokohama Ankokugai Mashingan no Ryu)- usually sharing screentime with Yakuza superstar Bunta Sugawara. Lest we forget Chiba's 1978 supporting role as "Prince Hans," the rightful deposed heir to the throne of the Gavanas Empire, in Fukusaku's interstellar version of the ancient long-novel "Satomi Hakkenden" Message from Space (Uchu-kara no Messeji). Chiba out his all into this role as well; while performing a simple stunt (chasing Empress Dark, played by Eisei Amamoto) a prop gate came crashing down on his legs. breaking one of them.

Yes, 1978 was a big year for Chiba, for he starred in Fukusaku's box-office smashing film of feudal intrigue and ninjutsu: Plot of the Yaqvu Clan (Yaqvu-Ichizoku no Inbo aka The Yaqvu Conspiracy); which was spun-off into an equally-popular teleseries of the same name (aka Shogun's Samurai). For 1980, more ninjas and swordsmen were in store for Chiba - including the Kadokawa Productions's fantasy film cross-over Timeslip (Sengoku Jietai). the American film The Bushido Blade (a depressing rip-off of the Spaghetti Western Red Sun: both with Toshiro Mifune), and Virus (Fukkatsu no Hi)another hit motion-picture, Hanzo Hattori: The Shadow Army (Hattori Hanzo Kage no Gundan), which was also spun-off into a hit teleseries of the same name. This was followed by more cathode ninias in The Violent Yaqvu Clan (Yaqyu Abare-zoku), The Shadow Army II & III. Jubei Yaqvu's Violent Clan (Yaqvu Jubei Abare-zoku), and The Shadow Army IV. All showcasing the brilliant members of JAC: Sanada. Shiomi, Kenii Oba, Junichi Haruta, etc.

While all of this was going on, Chiba continued to do films, playing more supporting roles, but dragging the entire JAC stable with him for Ninja Scrolls: Sandayu Momochi (Ninja Bugeicho

Momochi Sandayu aka Shogun's Ninja), Roaring Iron-Fist (Hoero Tekken aka Roaring Fire). The Kamikaze Adventurers (Bokensha Kamikaze), Ninja Wars (Iga Ninpo-cho)-all starting Sanda, Kabama-ru the Ninja (Iga no Kabamanu), Kotaro to the Rescue (Kotaro-o Omakase)—both starting hikaru Kurosaki (and based on comic books), and The Burning Brave (Moero Yusha).

Then there were more important films of the '80s' the supernatural classic story-cum-play-cum-movie Samurai Reincarnation (Makai Tensho), Hidee Gosha's Hunter in the Dark (Yami no Karyudo), the thrilling Deadly 4: We'll Avenge You (Hisatsul 4 Urami Harashimasu), and Fukusaku's tribute to the sutminan: The Fall Guy.

Of course, then there's the biggest film Chiba's ever been associated with (and one of the best and most elaborate period fantasy films ever shot in Japan). Kinji Fukusaku's tremendous adaptation of the ancient long-novel Saga of the Eight Dogs of Satomi (Satomi Hakkenden aka Legend of the Eight Samurai). This epic & expensive Hanuki Kadokawa production is the period equivalent of what Message from

Space should have been. Satomi Hakkenden, with it's all-star cast, elaborate and massive sets, and lavish special effects. is must-see viewing.

In the last ten-years, Chiba's recent efforts have included sedate telemovies such as Midnight Welcome (Mayonaka no Yokoso)- about a convenience store manager (!), Tomorrow's Snow (Yuki no Asahi)- a middle-aged man falls in love with a young woman, and The Travelling Girl (Tabi Shojo). Fortunately for us, Sonny Chiba has been cropping up recently in action films once again-a JAC 20th Anniversary film Yellow Fangs (Remeinsu), Iron Eagle III: Aces (with Lou Gosset, of course), Fighting Fists (Tekken: a Japan/HK co-production. which he starred, choreographed, and directed), Attack!! Shogun lemitsu Is Crazy (Shogun lemitsu no Ranshin Gekitotsull), Immortal Combat with (Wrestling Superstar rowdy Roddy Piper(!), and Body Count with Robert Davi and Brigitte Neilsen(!!)

And guess what? Even at 57, he's still at it! Shinichi "Sonny" Chiba has recently headlined in an all-new original move for Toei's V-Cinema labe!: The Silencer (Za Sairensa), proving that you can't keep a real mean bastard down.

In America, top name performers don't endorse commercial products for fear that it will "compromise their integrity" but if the bucks are big enough— and if the other side of the world...

WHO WILL EVER KNOW?



Many stars have decided to compromise their integrity and grab the fast money offered by the Japanese ad agencies. Here are a few more in the continuing ACC expose:

 Quentin Tarantino is involved in a massive advertising blitz for new Perfect TV satellite dish



hawks — Madras Shoes
Jean Reno
loves Premie



INTRODUCING SAMURAI CINEMA observations and commentary by Travis Crawford

Anyone with an interest in international cinema knows that the state of theatrical distribution for foreign films in America is embarrassingly poor these days- gone are the repertory arthouse glory years of the 60's and 70's, when seemingly even the most obscure and difficult cinematic imports would all wash ashore to afford culture-shock confusion to a formerly open-minded cross-section of adventurous American filmgoers. And if it's safe to assume that the home-video revolution was a major factor in contributing to this decline of foreign film distribution, it would however be unwise to then assume that video would also serve as the foreign film buffs salvation.

While there are certainly innumerable world cinema treasures to be found on American video, many of these originally came out in the home video boom of the 80's, and would probably never see the light of day in today's Blockbusterhomogenized conservative video climate. This decade has so far suffered a dramatic decline in the number of offthe-beaten-path foreign films to have been granted a video release, and transversely, a rise in the popularity of mailorder "graymarket" video companies that offer obscure foreign titles for sale. It is precisely this kind of limited American home-video industry that makes the debut of the Samurai Cinema label such a cause for excitement. A new video company created by the same people behind the North Carolina-based Japanese animation outfit AnimEigo. Samurai Cinema is devoting itself to releasing beautiful new wide-screen transfers- on tape and laserdisc-of some of Japan's greatest chambara films of the 1960's and 70's.

One certainly can't argue with the three samurai film series they have chosen to release, as they have selected the greatest and most acclaimed of all the chambaras. Most are familiar with the legendary Lone Wolf and Child series with Tomisaburo Wakayami as hired assassin Itto Ogami, but American fans

of the movies probably never imagined they would be fortunate enough to see all six films in the original series released in this country on laserdisc, in breathtakingly sharp mint condition, with widescreen letterboxinb and expertly rendered new subtitles. Over the course of the next year, this will be a reality, as all of Samurai's planned releases will be issued on laserdisc as well as videotage. both containing the same widescreen transfers. This regal treatment will be extended to not only the six Lone Wolf titles, but also the three films in the Razor (aka Hanzo the Blade) series (1972-74), and- perhaps most ambitiously on Samurai's part- all twelve entries in Sleepy Eves of Death (aka Son of Black Mass) series that ran from 1963-69, with actor Raizo Ichikawa.

Samurai Cinema's Albert Price-who wears a variety of hats at Anim-Eigo ranging- from Art Director and Marketing Director to VP of Sales-- spoke with me recently about the company's game plan behind their release schedule: bi-monthly, Samurai will release two new titles, with the tape releases to arrive on the final Tuesday of the month, and then the discs of the same two titles to be issued a week or two later. The first entries in the Lone Wolf and Razor series have already been released (tape in late November, disc in mid-December), and the next two to follow will be the second Lone Wolf title (the astonishing Baby Cart at the River Styx, in my opinion, the best entry in the series) and the debut Sleepy Eyes of Death film, which Samurai has titled Chinese Jade (Jon title: Nemuri Kvoshiro Sappu-cho, translated as Nemuri Kyoshiro: Book Of Killing); these two are to be issued in late January for the tapes, early February for the discs (indeed, they may even be out by the time you read this). Each bimonthly duo of releases will always carry the next Lone Wolf title, while then alternating between releasing an entry in the Razor and the Sleepy Eyes series to accompany the Lone Wolf film; a year from now, when both the Lone Wolf and the Razor series have been completed, Samurai will apparently continue by finishing out all the films in the longer-running Sleepy Eyes series.

Twenty-one tapes and discs in all, encompassing three of the most popular and heralded chambara series Japan ever produced, is an undeniably ambitious and seemingly daunting undertaking, yet Price claims the endeavor wasn't as impossible as it might appear. AnimEigo had already established numerous contacts in the Japanese film industry with their animation releases. and were searching for new ways to utilize their connections outside of an increasingly crowded American Anime market, one which Price notes is "suffering a real lack of high-quality titles late-Both Price and the project's executive producer Robert Woodhead were fans of 70's Samurai films, and opted to tackle some of that genre's finest output. "It took almost a year of negotiations with Toho to get the contracts settled," Price

elaborated, "but we were fortunate that it all worked out—and the prints we have of the films are pristine, just gorgeous." Although fans of the series are undoubtedly rejoicing over these classic films finally receiving the video respect they deserve in this country, one element of the project is filkely to draw some confusion, and perhaps even criticism—Samurai Cimena's titles.

Not many would argue with the Lone Wolf titles- Samurai Cinema's heading of Lone Wolf and Cub matches the moniker given the series by various sources for years. And although the initial Kenii Misumi film has been christened Sword of Vengeance by Samurai instead of a more literal translation of the film's subtitle (the on-screen subtitling translation of the film's original Japanese title- Kozure Ookami: Ko O Kashi Ude Kashi- Child and Expertise for Rent. a variation on the more literal Video Search of Miami subtitle: Lend a Child. Lend an Arm), most of the series' other entries have been title-



for quite some time, and their Sleepy Eves of Death may confound Japanese film fans searching for movies in a series they had read about under the more popular title Son of the Black Mass (or Kyoshiro Nemuri). Price reports that the Samurai staff "constantly arqued" about the titles of the films, but ultimately the decision was not entirely up to them: "Toho was very specific and controlling over how they wanted this project to be handled, and actually, we pretty much went with their translations of the titles." Price said. "We tried to stay as close as possible, and the only thing we really deviated from was calling the one series Razor instead of Hanzo and that was Toho's decision more than ours." He also commented that Hanzo the Blade is only a title "known through the bootleg market, and that to an extent, the retitling of the series is in some ways a move to separate the officially licensed releases from the pirate copies that came before. Price also points out that Son of Black Mass will be utilized as a subtitle for the Sleepy Eves of Death series, and that, much like the Lone Wolf films, the individual film titles may be altered slightly for colloquial effect: For the Sleepy Eyes films, we actually ended up using either the common name of the film, or a mild transmutation of it- for example, instead of Devilish Sword, it became Sword of Satan, more for simple alliteration

appeal than anything else." Of course, to the casual viewer, the slight titling differences won't seem nearly as controversial as the graphic violence on display in all the films, and the explicit sexuality and probable misogyny at work in the Razor trilogy. This is, after all, a series which centers around an Edo inspector who coerces confessions out of his suspects by torturing them with his penis, which he also keeps in shape by hammering it on a wood block. Did Samurai worry at all about exposing the infamous sado-masochistic perverse spectacles of the Japanese film industry to an unsuspecting American public? "I think some of the more conservative

members of our company were a little put off by the Razor films, but we all have a sense of humor about it," Price laughs, "But what's hunny—and amazing—is how seriously the Japanese take these lilms. They take their samural cin-ema very seriously. In fact, we toyed may be a seriously in fact, we toyed with the approach of a longue-in-check with the price of the pric

Price adds that Samurai Cinema's interest in Nippon films certainly isn't limited to the three series they are currently releasing, and depending on the response given their initial videos, they may branch out into other genres of Japanese film: "We've done a lot of research into Japanese cinema now. and have uncovered other genres and types of movies we would like to exploit as well." Price noted it was too early to give specifics, although he mentioned action and horror films might be a future area of focus for Samurai. Whatever they tackle, if it's up to the standards set by their first two releases, the presentation is guaranteed to be impeccable:

Both The Razor and Lone Wolf have been given the same transfers for the videotape and laserdisc releases; I have seen both the tapes and discs for each title, and although obviously the discs sparkle with a sharpness and richness in detail that the tapes can't come close to duplicating, this is simply a difference in the basic format— the tapes also look excellent. Both titles are letterboxed at about 2.0:1; never having seen either film in a theater. I can't comment on how this aspect ratio accurately reflects the original composition of the film, but the framing appears appropriate, and never feels cropped. The image quality is outstanding, perhaps even more so in Razor's transfer, the virtually flawless prints well served by a crisp transfer that offers a visual experience the pirated copies of these films never even hinted at: the films are also, of course, uncut.

Travis Crawford is a familiar name in fandom, a respected contributor to many magazine including Cineraider, European Trash Cinema, Video Watchdog and of course ACC. He lives near New York City

ACC Reviews



V MADONNA: THE GREAT WAR (1984) DIRECTED BY GENJI NAKAMUR

YUKARI USAMI * KOZUE SAITO RIKAKO MURAKAMI * SABURO TOKITO REVIEWED BY

RICHARD KADREY

What starts out as an obvious homage to Seven Samural, this time in a high school beset with biker bullies, turns into something weirdly other in V Madonna: Great War. This is a movie all about homage and pastiche, echoing not only Seven Samural and Yojimbo, but Road Warrior and even Billy Jack and Roger Corman's biker films from the 60s. But it all gets a gender twist that is again twisted during the film.

V Madonna starts off in straight-forward and classic exploitation style: A brutal and well choreographed biker attack on a high school— Kibougaoka School— by the thugs from rival Yagyu School As the fight progresses from the school building to the athletic field, the camera pulls back to reveal a video monitor. We haven't been watching an actual an attack, but a recording of an attack from 6 months before. It's a nice visual trick and a filmic clue that more shifts of identity and presentation are to follow. Keigo, the president of the student council reminds the other council members that Yagyu school comes by for their bribe/Inbute-the entire student activity fund-every six months. There are two weeks to go before the bikers show up again. Should they make the smart move and simply hand over the money, possibly saving themselves a beating?

A voice trom the back encourages them to fight back It's Keigo's little sister, a sort of updated version of the too-smart Japanese school kid. You've seen her type before in Anime, Japanese comedies and old Godzilla and Gamera movies: she's a too sharp, too cute and too insistent. She's always Gamera's friend. A slightly annoying character, she's also a Japanese comedy staple and fairly ignorable for it. In V Madonna, her character is updated as a sort of softcore girl-Otaku, a computer whiz obsessed with programs and patterns.

Convinced by his little sister that she knows someone who can help them fight back against the Yagyu bikers, Keigo goes with her to meet the fighter. They meet another biker, a hotshot rider in full molocross gear zooming over the dunes



by the ocean. So far, the film has followed the Seven Samurai model faithfully, but we make our first detour here. The biker is a young woman, Saeka Agawa. Keigo is puzzled and embarrassed by this, but with nowhere else to go, he accepts the biker's help. And slips back into the Seven Samurai myth as Saeka gathers up other female troops for the battle. These include a wrestler, a fireworks expert, a stuntwoman and a gang headed by Razor Maki, an expelled tough girl from Kibougaoka School.

The Seven Samurai plot trundles along in functional and obvious ways for the first third of the film, up to Yaqvu School's unsuccessful attack on Kibougaoka School. After that, everything shifts.

The students of Kibougaoka School are thrilled that they've beaten Yaqvu School. Saeka knows they haven't. She saw a familiar face when the Yaqvu school thugs were running away. Like the gender surprise when Saeka, the biker and fighter, reveals herself to be female, there's another here. The allmale biker gang of Yagyu School is revealed to be run by a woman: Leopard. What started out as a simple re-gendered version of Seven Samurai shifts abruptly. It's no longer just about how the strong girls help defeat the evil boys. It becomes more subversive and subtle. V Madonna isn't about gender. but gender roles

Here, the last secret is revealed. Saeka knows Leopard. It's made obvious that they used to run together and were lovers. Somewhere along the way, Saeka got sick of Leopard's brutal life and took off. While she remains a tough biker, she's also embraced a life that's more classically female in it's style: a supportive extended family that can be tough when needed, but chooses to negotiate and care for one another. Leopard has become fully and aggressively male in temperament; hostile. inflexible, brutal, single-minded and unforgiving. The central battle of V Madonna centers on these two opposing versions of modern Japanese (and perhaps all most-feminist) women. There is one other striking aspect to V

Madonna, both visually and thematically. Adults are virtually non-existent in the film. Like some demented pop-culture Lord of the Flies, the students of both Kibougaoka and Yagyu schools dispense bribes, barricade their school, attack, burn and blow up students and school property with no sign of adult supervision. These characters exist in an island of adolescent angst, confusion and racing hormones. Leopard is the closest thing to an adult figure in the story. There are no parents, teachers or cops in their world. This gives the film an otherworldly quality, as if it could be taking place on some Earth look-alike where everyone over 19 has been exiled to Monster Island.

By turns too light and too dark (the fear of the Kibougaoka students is often a goofy, movie version of fear; the brutality of the Yaqvu thugs, especially when they're tracking down and reeking revenge on the all-female force that beat them, is all too realistic and grim), V Madonna is fascinating for these contradictions. For all it's low-budget Roger Cormanesque look and feel, it remains extremely non-American. Sure something like it could have been shot here (and probably has), but not with the strange wit, energy and visual fun of V Madonna: The Great War. It's another Nippon cult film in the Keko Mask (or Female Neo Ninjas) tradition.

ORGAN (1996) DIRECTED BY KEI FUJIWARA REVIEWED BY PETE TOMBS

Anyone searching for a sleazy, cheesy trip into the underworld need look no further. Organ is that film. It crawls across the screen like a slithering beast, leaving a trail of slime in its wake. Everything in the movie is dark, depressing and downbeat. Even the street scenes are filmed in dim back alleys far from the steel and concrete of the usual Tokyo cityscape.

There are essentially two strands to the narrative. The film beings with a police investigation. "Tokyo 1995," the voice-over of Detective Numata tells us: "the smell of death attracts the sellers of human organs....."

In a grimy shed known as the slaughterhouse, a team of organ sellers led by the one-eved harridan Yoko is dismembering a body. This time they've found a live one. An undercover policeman- Detective Numata's brother--who has infiltrated the gang, is too horrified to keep silent, "he's still alive.... put it back!" he cries as the team's surgeon removes the

man's liver. The gang abandon their gruesome lab and go on the run, taking the cop with them. The traumatized Numata then begins a relentless search for his missing brother that leads to a blood solattered climax.

The other strand of story concerns Yoko's brother Saeki. He's a mild mannered biology technician at a girl's high school. However, as we soon discover, behind the door of his lab Lurks a terrible secret. In a giant vivarium he has the limbless torso of the captured cop. It's kept alive by strange drugs and fed on the blood of schoolgirls whom Saeki also uses for weith sexual practices.

As Numata tracks down his brother, to too the yakuza gang who are behind the organ racket are attempting to eliminate Yoko and Saeki. They have become too wild, too extreme, and out of control. When these two plot strands meet, at the end of the film, the result is a bloodbath

of epic proportions, hideous, laughable and at times unwatchable.

As the film progresses from one incredibly sleazy set piece to the next, we learn they story of Saeki and Yoko. A flashback to their early childhood shows their mother attacking Saeki and trying to bite off his penis as revenge for his

father's womanizing. When Yoko attempts to stop her, the mother lashes out at the girl, blinding her in one eve. Saeki survives the attack, but he is permanently maimed. His liver needs constant replacement--- hence the pair's involvement in the organ racket--- and the drugs he takes to stay alive seem to be turning him into some sort of puss-

filled vegetable. Everyone and everything in **Organ** is mean, sleazy and covered in slime and gore.

On one level the film is a slap in the face to any notion of good taste. For no particular reason, one encounter takes place in a men's toilet. The conversation is punctuated by references to the shit smeared around one of the howls and a lengthy sequence shows it being cleaned off. In another scene, Numata's wife is raped on a stained bed. Afterwards she rolls back the mattress and urinates onto a pile of newspapers underneath it. Even the school mistress who eventually uncovers Saeki's secret is a sexual deviant. Stripping off his shirt, she finds the suppurating wound over his liver. Instead of being horrified she is fascinated and cuts it with a knife. Then she demands he make love to her. At the moment of orgasm, brown liquid spews from Saeki's mouth.

Yes, indeed, **Organ** is not a film to see on a full stomach. Its felid atmosphere of abnormality will have you screaming to be let out. And yet, you keep on watching, fascinated. For all its mean spirited nastiness, **Organ** is a perfect example of the power of contemporary Japanese horror— to revolt, amaze and intrigue the viewer, all at the same time.

HIGH RISK (1995) DIRECTED BY WONG CHIN [JING]

JET LI * JACKY CHEUNG CHINGMY YAU * VALERIE CHOW REVIEWED BY THOMAS WEISSER

Obviously, for director/producer Wong Ching [Jing], nothing is sacred. A few short years ago, he was working with Jackie Chan in City Hunter (1993), patting him on the back and singing his praises. Now Wong is viciously lampooning the popular superstar. (Jackie Chan has publicly complained over the cinematic assault in this film.) About the best thing that can be said about this movie is, unlike other Wong Ching productions. it does manage to keep on track; there's continuity and a sense of direction. The movie follows a linear storyline, with few sidesteps for slapstick or out-of-character theatrics. But, a bigger problem remains; besides the obvious attack against Jackie Chan, there's no reason for the film to exist. Wong China's entire purpose is to belittle the world-famous icon in as many ways as possible.

Jacky Cheung plays Jackie (or rather, he's called Frankie). Frankie is a mug-ging, hamming-it-up actor who constantly plants stories in the press about how he always does his own stunts, even though he really doesn't. The death-defying stuff is actually handled by a special team of private stunt-doubles. The best is a man named Kit (Jet Li), who gravitated to the dangerous occupation after his wife and child were killed by a maniac (Kelvin Wong) in a bus bombing. Kit has worked himself into an ath-

lete with amazing agility (not unlike Jet Li, himself).

On the other hand. Frankie is a jellyfish. a coward who's hoodwinked his legion of adoring fans. He uses his unwarranted popularity to become a boorish, arrogant, womanizing creep. In reality, Frankie is a wimp ready to turn tail and run at the first sign of trouble. Then, one day, an ambitious "Hard Copy" television reporter (Chingmy Yau) takes pictures of stuntman Kit as he secretly doubles for Frankie. She threatens to expose the scandal on TV, destroying the actor's credibility and, thus, his career. Meanwhile, Frankie and his bodyquards attend a public appearance at a snazzy jewelry show. But in typical Die Hard fashion, they suddenly find themselves in the middle of a robbery and hostage situation. Frankie freaks out: although he pretends to be in control, it's difficult for him to hide his cowardliness (ie., Jacky Cheung doing his best Don Knots imitation). But Kit realizes his nightmare has become a reality; the chief bad guy is the same bastard who killed his wife and kid This turns the stunt double into a vengeful freedom fighter as he saves the hostages and manages to make Frankie look good at the same time.

GONIN (FIVE) (1995) DIRECTED BY TAKASHI ISHII KOICHI SATO : MASSAHIRO MOTOKI BEATTAKESHI : NAOTO TAKENAKA REVIEWED BY STEVE PUCHALSKI

Director/writer Takashi Ishii is known for his bizarre cinematic sensibilities, and with Gonin, he brings them full force to the crime genre. Tackling a more traditional storyline than his earlier features, the result is a hard-boiled tale of five men who go up against the Yakuza, with less than successful results (that's putting it mildly, of course). Sure, this may sound like little more than the Woo-clone posturing which inundated '90s action cinema. But as usual for Ishii, the film's success lies in its gorgeously dis-

turbing style, which successfully combines crazed camerawork, editing and sound design into a tour de force of brutality and despair. Ishii doesn't waste any time sucking

the viewer into his seductive world, with Koichi Sato starring as Mikihiko Bandai, an ex-disco singer turned nightclub owner, who's on the verge of exploding. It's no surprise, because despite his fancy clothes and ritzy car, he's actually nosedeen in debt to the local Gosei clan. The weight of this debt is particularly evident when a drunken Yakuza named Nomoto is freely allowed to create latenite havoc at his club. Or when Bandai has to literally bow down and grovel before his creditors. Demoralized. but not down, he conceives of a plan to get even. All Bandai needs are the right men. Unfortunately, on such short notice, all he can find are a ragtag bunch of strangers who, against all odds, are willing to give this plan a go.

First, there's Ogiwara (Naoto Takenaka, from Ishi's earlier Night Of Nakedness (1993), an unemployed family man who's both the goofiest and most volatile of the group. But he's also the first to put his own life on the line by (ineptly) defending Bandai during his run-in with Nomoto. Also on hand that evening is a flamboyant gay bystander, Mitsuya (Masahiro Motoki, from last year's Mystery Of Rampo) who pulls a knife on the piss-drunk gangster. Later, Bandai recruits a pimp named Jimmy (Kippel Shilina), who has an inside

route to the gang's HQ. And most important, there's ex-cop Hizu (Jinpachi Nezu, the star of two of Ishir's Angel Guts entries, Night Is Falling Again and Red Lightning), who was jailed and disgraced after the Gosei gang exposed a police cover-up.

Together, the quintet don ski masks and rip off the Yakuza stronghold. But as any Village Idiot could've told them. stealing from the mob is never a smart idea, especially when the plot includes a Thai prostitute who rats them out. The second half of the film has the group on the nun from a pair of morally bankrupt hitman, led by the one-eved Kyova, Badass assassins are a dime-a-dozen in 90s cinema, but here the small (but pivotal) role is taken to demented heights thanks to "Beat" Takashi Kitano. Still recovering from a debilitating motorcycle accident a year earlier. Kitano blows an icy breeze into the proceedings, as the type of guy who'll do anything to complete his job-even if it means slaughtering an innocent family.

Taken on its most fundamental levels. this is a clockwork exercise in crime and punishment (if a bit on the pretentious side for mainstream action addicts). What sets this apart from the usual crimeland misadventures is Ishii's knowledge of when to simply glide about his actors with a cool eloquence-and when to circle in for the hyper-kinetic kill. Much of the film's distinctive high style should also be attributed to Ishii's production team, most of whom are longtime associates (in fact, the credits look like a photocopy of Night Is Falling Again, including cinematographer, editor, composer, and art director).

Unlike most directors, who would bury any homoerotic subtext as deep as possible, Ishii doesn't shy from this current, which only energizes the proceedings (even allowing Mitsuva to plant a kiss on Bandai before departing). And while the characters can range from the tragic to the merely annoying, they stand out as five desperate men, all hoping for one last chance at a turnabout in their screwed up lives. Their misguided search for redemption doesn't make for a lighthearted romp, but it's certainly a dazzling one. Steeped in nihilism, this celluloid kamikaze makes most crime nics look like skim milk

contributors to this review section: Richard Kadrey is the author of Counter-Culture Handbook and film ortic for Wired, Pete Tombs, of Immoral Tales fame, is working on his new book Mondo Macabro Steve Puchalisk delts Shock Clinema and writes for Fangoria; Thomas Weisser edits this magazine



The editor of this magazine, one Thomas Weisser, has accused me, in no uncertain terms, of becoming a "wuss." I think Mr Weisser may be an example of how one's sensibilities—both artistic and personal—can become blunted by too much exposure to overly violent, overly sexual material. On the other hand, it's also possible that I ont a wuss—merely an individual of more delicately refined tastes than Mr Weisser.

But whether I have gone candyass soft in my middle age— or Weisser has been corrupted in that manner scientifically proven by Dr Fredric Wetham in his recognized classic Seduction Of The

Innocent— there can be no doubt that many Japanese genre films contain elements that cause the sort of culture shock that outrage mainstream American sensibilities, even as they delight home-grown cult-movie fanatics like us.

Still, the acceptance of rape as a recurring, even standard plot point in Japanese genre films troubles me, and not because I think fictional narratives should avoid that particular criminal act. Nor am I offended in any Alan Alda-

ish manner. Where I get uncomfortable is when rape (and this is true of other immoral and amoral acts, as depicted in fiction) is presented by the storyteller in a hypocritical way. I am less troubled by the satirical (if heavy-handed) approach of the Rapeman films than by what I encounter in an extremely well-made film like XX: Beautiful Prey (1996). At least Rapeman is up front about its. shall we say, feminist puncturing approach: it is sexist, albeit tonque-incheek, and skewers the vigilante/ superhero concept as effectively (and outrageously) as it does the battle of the sexes. Perhaps what troubles me most

about XX: Beautiful Prey is how GOOD it is: a well written, tricky screenplay is brought to life evocatively by Evil Dead Trap (1988) director Toshiharu Ikeda, with an artistry of imagery and a technical expertise that, frankly, I envy. Possibly I'm wrong in raising what seems to me a central artistic hypocrisy in this film: possibly I'm merely disturbed by a powerful piece of filmmaking... and. as a wuss, simply can't handle such strong stuff.

Let me save my carping to the end. Allow me to



Max Allan Collins is the author of more than 50 books, including the newest in his Nate Heller series. Dammed in Paradase (Dutton): he is the two-time winner of the PWA Shamus: Best Novel award (for True Detective (1983) and Stolen Away (1991)) Max received international acclaim for his novel of the Clint Eastwood lift in 17 he Line Of Fire: he also directed Mommy 2: Mommy's Day (in wid stores soon) now praise a film of considerable merit. XX: Beautiful Prey is another in a series of films depicting strong women in noirish situations, based on the popular XX series, a collection of short stories by novelist Arimsa Oosawa. Prey begins with what is apparently a crime in progress- the rape, and possibly attempted murder, of a wealthy industrialist's younger wife (Kei Marimura); the crime is investigated by a veteran, middle-aged male cop (Ren Ohsugi) and his female rookie protege (Meiko Watanabe). When the industrialist is brutally murdered, the investigation begins to center on the wife's lover, a sadistic leather-wearing lout. Upon this simple skeleton, the flaved flesh of the narrative begins to reveal itself; the wife is heavily into S&M sex games, and plays masochist to her leather-lover's sadist. Gradually she pulls first

the grizzled veteran cop into her web of hurtful sex and then the naive rookie, with dire consequences paid by both.

In real life, Kei Marimura is a popular jazz singer whose vocals add to the film's already haunting quality, including an English language remake of the Victor Young song Love Letters. It's difficult to believe this is Marimura's first film, as she dominates every scene as the supposed submissive. The other principals are fine, as well, and director Ikeda has fashioned a cinematic landscape that puts America's best erotic

thrillers to shame Prey's world is painted in cool. dark colors, mostly earth tones with many sequences in monochrome sometimes blue or blue-green, other times vellow.

But it is the dizzying camerawork that predominates. though this is not pointless show-off stuff: The camera may turn in circles but it points to the final destination of the tale: the "hero" of the piece, the rookie COD gets her world

turned upside



accosted by a sadist, and above. Kei Marimura is a machochist for S&M sex games

down, and reality is the opposite of what it sometimes seems. This classic noir theme is visually well-realized: the first shot begins upside-down, as the "victim" is raped and stabbed; a corpse hangs from its feet; a cop's car winds up on its back like a bug being tortured; a victim is on his back as a murderer backs a car over him. The film closes with a single extended 12 minute camera shot that is both brilliantly executed (steadicam? a ceiling mounted dolly?) that even manages to shift point of view from one character to another.

The film's central notion-that in a sado-masochistic relationship, it is the masochist who truly rules-is fascinating, and culminates in a bizarre if logical corollary that suggests the ultimate S&M pleasure would be the death of a lover.

So if I admire this movie so much, why do I have a problem with it? Simply, Prev seems to abhor the behavior of its villain, and implicitly S&M games, while at the same time reveling in it. This strikes me not as artistic ambiguity, but at least borderline exploitation. In other words, don't get off on S&M (including protracted rapes scenes involving a sympathetic character) and then wind up by implying a condemnation of those activities. That kind of hypocrisy has been around a long time-- it was Hollywood's way of handling "taboo subjects" and the Breen Office.

Would I like Prey more if it more implicitly approved of the dark deeds of its villains? Probably not-I am enough of a wuss to dislike pro-rape films, and my interest in sex is related to things that feel good as opposed to having a red hot poker shoved up my ass. But the lingering after effect of Prey is that of a sleazy erotic thriller (think Body Of Evidence), not the brilliant crime film (ie. Body Heat) that it mostly is. Some other random thoughts:

The writer of Ikeda's justly famed Evil Dead Trap- Takashi Ishii- is the writer/director of Gonin, which I understand is reviewed elsewhere in this issue (see the Review Section). But let me take time here to urge you to seek out this thriller, a complexly-woven caper, hard-hitting, startling, with cinematography that captures a film noir look and feel better than any other color film I can think of, I admit to not completely following the rather bold homosexual elements of various relationships in Gonin, but this film out does the very good Score (see last issue). lacking that film's sometimes comical Tarantino aping, although some of the references to American films are unexpected- would you believe. Midnight Cowboy?

Finally, Jackie Chan fans should be aware that his (relatively) recent Thunderbolt is not among the titles picked up by American distributors. Some reviewers have found this entry lacking, and its combination of race car melodrama and crime story couldn't be clumsier. Yes, I am frustrated that Chan entries, like Thunderbolt, can be so sophisticated on a filmmaking level- not only the stunts, but the cinematography is often amazing-while the scripts themselves are at times embarrassingly juvenile. And ves. Thunderbolt is at least as disjointed, illogical, and enisodic as any Jackie Chan picture you might see. But those set-pieces are thrilling. I wish Jackie would give us better movies, which is to say better stories, something serious, at least in the dramatic sense. Movies like Thunderbolt are vehicles for a comic acrobat. and are wonderful- and lousy- in the way Jerry Lewis or Danny Kave movies often were.



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